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Author **Yomu Mishima**

Illustrator **Tomozo**



SEVENTH



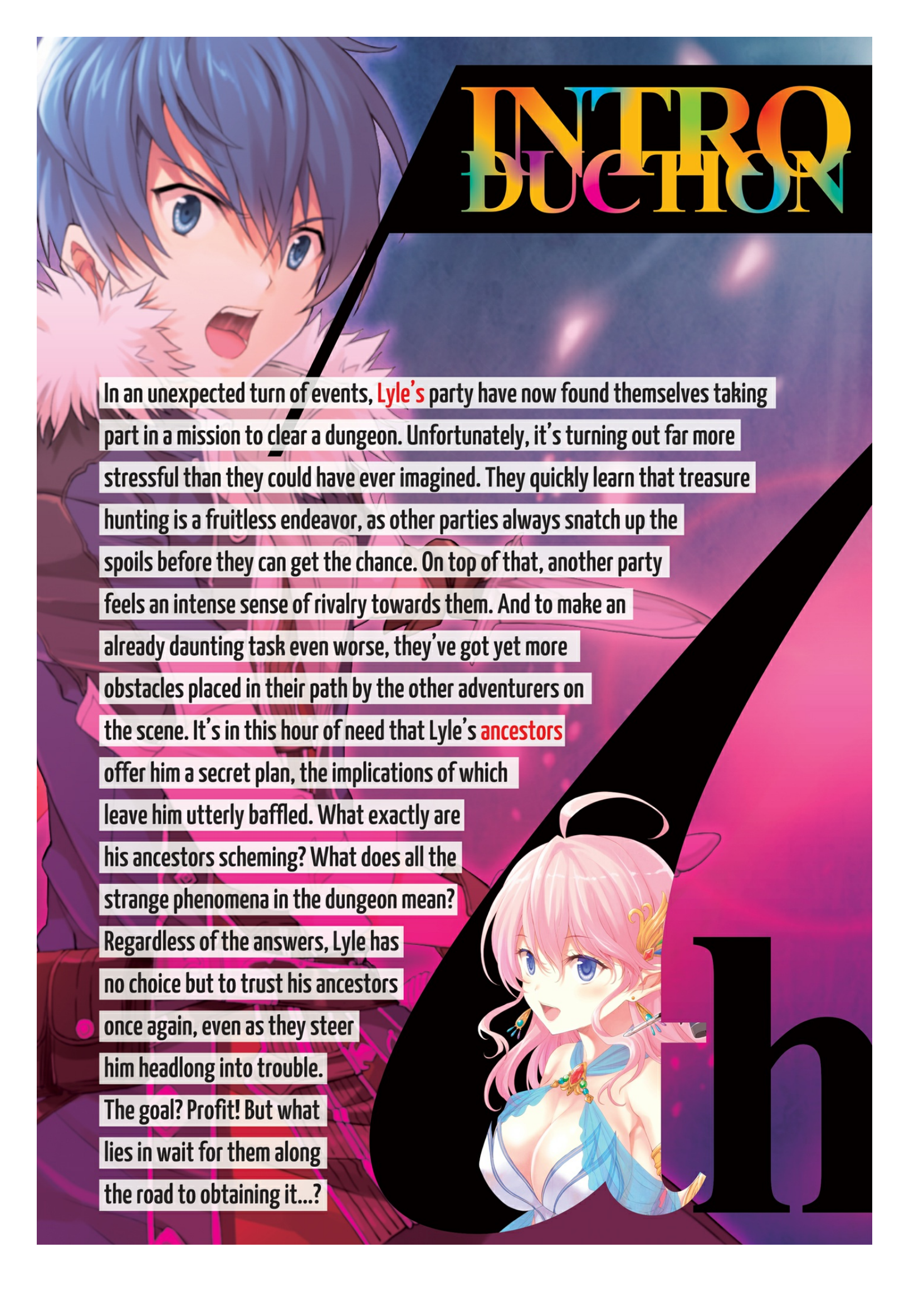
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INTRO DUCTION

In an unexpected turn of events, **Lyle's** party have now found themselves taking part in a mission to clear a dungeon. Unfortunately, it's turning out far more stressful than they could have ever imagined. They quickly learn that treasure hunting is a fruitless endeavor, as other parties always snatch up the spoils before they can get the chance. On top of that, another party feels an intense sense of rivalry towards them. And to make an already daunting task even worse, they've got yet more obstacles placed in their path by the other adventurers on the scene. It's in this hour of need that Lyle's **ancestors** offer him a secret plan, the implications of which leave him utterly baffled. What exactly are his ancestors scheming? What does all the strange phenomena in the dungeon mean? Regardless of the answers, Lyle has no choice but to trust his ancestors once again, even as they steer him headlong into trouble. The goal? Profit! But what lies in wait for them along the road to obtaining it...?



SEVENTH

Arts of the Ages

First Head



Basil Walt

First Stage Full Over

Raises physical abilities from between 10% to 20%.

Second Stage Limit Burst

Allows user to exhibit strength beyond their physical limits while temporarily ignoring the burden on their body.

Third Stage Full Burst

A blue flame envelops the user's body, significantly increasing physical abilities.

Second Head



Crassel Walt

First Stage All

The user can grant their Arts to others. The user perceives all applicable targets in a nearby radius, effectively eliminating blind spots.

Second Stage ???

Third Stage ???

Third Head



Sley Walt

First Stage ???

Second Stage ???

Third Stage ???

Fourth Head



Marcus Walt

First Stage

Speed

Gives a stable boost to movement speed.

Second Stage

???

Third Stage

???

Fifth Head



Fredriks Walt

First Stage

Map

Grants the ability to view one's surroundings as a map.

Second Stage

???

Third Stage

???

Sixth Head



Fiennes Walt

First Stage

Search

Distinguishes friend from foe, and identifies the location of traps among other things.

Second Stage

???

Third Stage

???

Seventh Head



Brod Walt

First Stage

???

Second Stage

???

Third Stage

???

Arts of the Ages	Author Yomu Mishima		
Prologue			
Chapter 31	Subjugation Preparation		Illustrator Tomozo
Chapter 32	The Silver Weapon		
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Prologue

With July soon to come, the summer season was finally entering full swing in Darion, a city where newbie adventurers gathered. But despite the blazing sun, it was common to see the city's adventurers dressed thickly, with hardly any of their skin exposed to the outside air. Those who wore metal armor would cover it in cloth so it didn't absorb too much heat.

This was a natural choice for any adventurer who was out to fight monsters to make—the more skin they left exposed, the more unguarded flesh there was for an enemy to target.

That being said, you would think that some of this protective layer could be shed once they entered the city. But to an adventurer, weapons and armor were valuable tools of the trade—those items served as their lifelines. If an adventurer's gear was stolen or left behind, that could very well put an end to their career.

And so, our sordid group trudged through the streets of Darion, enveloped in the sweltering heat.

I—Lyle Walt, that is—was headed off on a monster hunt. I was already sweaty because I'd been armored up since early that morning, and my blue hair was practically glued to my brow with perspiration.

"Ugh," I moaned to the other four members of my party. "It's so hot..."

I was handed a canteen by Novem Fuchs, our magician. Her fox-colored hair was pulled up in its characteristic side ponytail, and her navy robe was pulled up over the crown of her head. Her silver rarium staff, which was a family heirloom, glistened from within the cloth she'd wrapped it in.

"You must remember to hydrate frequently, milord," Novem reminded me. "And to take in some salt as well."

Beyond being my party's magician, Novem was also my former fiancée. Even after I'd been driven from my home, she'd chosen to remain by my side and

diligently take care of me. She was what my ancestors would refer to as a “splendid woman.”

I took in a mouthful of water.

“Don’t drink too much at once,” cautioned our instructor, Zelphy. “And make sure you moisten your whole mouth before you swallow.”

Zelphy was one of Darion’s few veteran adventurers. Her purple hair was cut short, and her body was currently clad in leather armor. Her preferred fighting style was using a sword and shield.

We’d paid Zelphy a small fortune to make first-rate adventurers out of us—a fortune which had come from Novem selling off her dowry.

She’s so devoted, I thought despairingly. I can barely look her in the eye.

No matter how ashamed her dedication made me, though, there was one part of Novem’s ideology that I simply couldn’t agree with. For some reason, Novem had a desire to surround me with other women. I couldn’t comprehend *why* Novem had this desire, but I could perhaps come up with a name for it.

“Harem-creation objective” might suffice... I could call it H.C.O. for short...

I glanced over my shoulder, noting the other two female adventurers in our party. It hadn’t been too long since they’d joined.

The first of the two girls was Aria Lockwood, whose red hair curled out at odd angles at the bottom. She’d hidden her toned body beneath a hefty robe, and hooked her spear over her shoulder. She walked energetically down the road, eyes locked onto a fruit stall hovering at the roadside.

The heat doesn’t seem to bother her, I mused.

“Hey, what about fruit, then?” Aria asked, pointing toward the goods. “Shouldn’t they hydrate you too?”

My eyes followed her gesture, and I caught sight of a fair few adventurers among the stall’s clientele. From what I could tell, the stall’s owner appeared to be selling red-colored fruits floating in a tub of ice water. They looked simply delectable under the beaming light of the summer sun.

I watched as Sophia Laurie, the second of our two new female adventurers,

gave the stall a slightly tormented look. She wore a black robe and had a cloth-wrapped battle-axe on her back; she, too, had a clear desire to eat one of the stall's fruits.

"I-If we buy some now and wait to eat them on our break, the heat will get to them, won't it?" she asked earnestly. "They won't be tasty anymore at that point. It feels like kind of a waste."

"Then we can just eat them here and now," Aria rebutted. "You can consider it a contribution toward our health. We'll save water, and it'll replenish some of the nutrients we're bleeding out in this heat."

It is important to eat and build stamina when we have the chance, I thought consideringly. Plus, it's so hot that when we eat lunch outside sometimes, I even have trouble swallowing my food.

I felt Zelphy tap on my back. She'd done it discreetly, so no one else would notice.

When I turned, I saw she was sending a signal to me with her eyes.

Ah, so I'm supposed to be the one paying, huh...?

I produced my wallet and bought enough of the fruit for everyone in my party.

The old lady running the stall wiped the water off the red fruit before handing it over with a smile. I pressed one against my cheek, allowing the chilled fruit to stave off some of the heat that had built up under my skin.

"Standing while eating is bad manners," Sophia declared, looking hesitant and a bit troubled.

Aria ignored her and began to nibble on her fruit as though eating while standing was perfectly normal. Spurred on by the sight, Sophia took a small bite of the fruit herself.

The fruit wasn't particularly large, and it hardly had any edible flesh. When I took a bite, its slightly sour flavor permeated my mouth and seemed to seep through my body.

I watched as Aria tossed her fruit's seed into a bin by the side of the stall, then

turned to face Novem.

Something about the way Aria's biting down on that fruit feels strangely graphic...

"Hey, Novem, can't you whip up some ice and throw it in the canteen?" Aria asked. "Then we can have cold drinks whenever we want."

Novem looked a little disturbed by the question. Zelphy, meanwhile, looked astounded—at least, judging by the look she sent Aria.

Sophia wiped her mouth and threw her seed away as she explained, "Didn't anyone ever tell you that you can't drink water made with magic? It makes a mess of your stomach."

The statement surprised me. "Really?" I exclaimed.

Suddenly, Aria and I were the targets of pitying eyes.

Is the question really that absurd?

The Jewel hanging around my neck, which was a House Walt family heirloom, came alive with the sounds of voices only I could hear.

The Jewel contained the revived memories of seven—no, six—of my ancestors. They all saw fit to give me their rather frustrated opinions.

"You didn't even know that?!" cried Crassel, the second head of House Walt. My lack of common sense seemed to set off alarm bells for him. "If you end up falling ill in the middle of battle, that'll be a huge deal!"

Sley, the third head of House Walt, let out a carefree laugh, but he seemed just as troubled as the second head. "That's terrible," he agreed, "But it's good we found out before he tried it. I'm not even kidding when I say that could be a matter of life or death."

"You'll be dead weight if you drink magic water," chastised Marcus Walt, the bespectacled fourth head. "Lyle, the girls would literally have to clean up after your mess."

Even the fifth head, Fredriks Walt, who only spoke up when necessary, couldn't stay silent at my hopelessness. "I've snuck into an enemy camp and replaced their water with magic water before. It was...terrible. Lyle, don't drink

it. No matter what you do. Don't."

So... I thought consideringly. *The fifth head's the sort to sneak behind enemy lines, huh?*

"One slipup, and you'll understand whether you like it or not," remarked Fiennes Walt, the sixth head. "Let's all be thankful that you won't have to experience it to learn your lesson, Lyle."

He's right, I thought. If I never learned that it made you sick, I may have tried to magic up some water once I ran out.

Brod Walt, the seventh head, cleared his throat. "Magic is not omnipotent. Lyle, you would do well to remember that."

Ah, what a fine day, I thought sarcastically, my shoulders drooping. A fine time to put my ignorance on full display yet again.

Zelphy walked to the front of our group. "Let's get going already," she called over her shoulder. "We need to be back by evening."

Our schedule as of late was to leave through the city's gate in the morning and spend most of the day hunting throughout the surrounding area. We kept close enough to the city that we could return before night fell.

Unfortunately, it seemed we'd hit the cap of what we could earn from nearby monsters. We didn't have that much time to work each day, and the monsters around Darion were not particularly profitable.

Zelphy had come to me recently with plans to head out farther. We'd all have to camp outside the city since we were hunting further afield. I wasn't sure when we were going to enact these plans, but Zelphy had told me doing so would allow us to earn more money.

I could hear the fourth head sighing from his place within the Jewel. "You don't have the ability to be leisurely about your finances right now. You'll run into trouble if you continue at this rate. Hunting in Darion doesn't earn you much. It's just enough to maintain your current status quo."

The reason the monster hunting in Darion paid so little was that Lord Bentler assertively dispatched knights and soldiers to deal with monsters in the area. He

was careful to make sure the public order of Darion was well maintained. Thus, while adventurers could be assured of their safety within the city's walls, they could also be assured that their pockets remained relatively empty.

This wasn't to say that there was a lack of work to be had within the city—instead of monster hunts, adventurers could take on odd jobs, or work in various establishments. Unfortunately, none of those occupations paid as much as a successful hunter could earn elsewhere.

Darion was certainly kind to newcomers, but there was a reason it was called a city for beginners. Once newbie adventurers became more experienced, the city began to appear more and more lacking.

"Lyle, your instruction period will end soon," the sixth head weighed in. "It's about time you start thinking about what you're going to do after that. You should decide whether you want to stay in Darion for a while or if there's some place in particular you want to go next."

The initial instruction period had been three months, but we'd extended it by two weeks. Now there was only a month remaining.

Have I become first-rate over the last two and a half months? I wondered, then immediately scoffed at myself. *Yeah, I'm not even going to entertain that thought.*

If nothing else, at least I'd learned what I needed to put bread on the table.

I lifted my head a bit to look up at the sky.

"What *should* I do after this...? Hmm..."

I wiped sweat from my brow as I considered what I'd do next.

Three receptionists sat in a row on the second floor of Darion's Adventurers' Guild, busily working on paperwork.

The most conspicuous one was, of course, the blonde, blue-eyed, beautiful Santoire Maillet, who—actually no, Hawkins definitely overshadowed her a bit.

Hawkins was a muscular, bald-headed goliath who typically wore a vest over his dress shirt. Despite what appearances would suggest, he was quite cordial

with the adventurers he spoke with, and was an incredibly diligent worker. He was the favorite of many of the veterans of the Darion Adventurers' Guild. His intimidating outer appearance, however, made it so the newer adventurers tended to avoid him. He was mindful of it, but there was little he could do.

Owing to this, Hawkins found himself with a bit more free time than his two coworkers. He began to organize his workspace when a staff member rushed out of the room behind the counter in a hurry. The staff member—a young man—spotted Hawkins and rushed over to him.

“What’s wrong?” Hawkins asked him.

“An envoy came from the lord,” the young man explained, handing several files over to Hawkins. “You’ve been ordered to attend a discussion, Mister Hawkins.”

A wrinkle settled into Hawkins’s brow as he scanned through the documents.

This...has been happening a lot lately, he thought.

The papers he’d been given were a report on a new dungeon that had formed near Darion. Hawkins immediately headed to the Guild conference room, allowing the young man to take his place at the receptionist desk.

He checked through the papers as he walked, making sure to memorize the dungeon’s size and characteristics.

They don’t know much of the details yet, I see.

It seemed this dungeon had only just been discovered, so they hadn’t yet conducted a proper investigation. Despite this, they had enough information to know that it seemed to be smaller than the other ones that had appeared recently. The report estimated that it would take somewhere between two to four weeks to conquer it.

But therein lay the problem.

The lord’s soldiers have only just returned, Hawkins thought worriedly. *It will be difficult to dispatch them again.*

Until recently, there had only been two dungeons near Darion. The first was being handled by Lord Bentler’s army, while the second was being treated as a

joint operation between the army and the Adventurers' Guild. The first dungeon had been cleared not long ago, so there had been only one dungeon remaining before this new one had appeared.

With Lord Bentler's soldiers having only just returned from dealing with all kinds of trials and tribulations, it was hard to imagine he would send them out once more...

The skilled adventurers and the larger parties are all off clearing the other dungeon, Hawkins thought. If they want the remaining adventurers to deal with it...this might be trouble.

Hawkins considered which remaining adventurers would be capable of conquering the dungeon. Few in Darion had the necessary experience. There would be no choice but to send lower-quality combatants.

As he mulled over what to do, he suddenly recalled the party that Zelphy was managing.

There's Lyle's party...but they're just not going to cut it. They're still in their instructional period, so I certainly wouldn't call them experienced. If this dungeon's an urgent matter, I should keep them out of it.

Even if their combat strength was up to par, there was no telling what might happen in a dungeon. And newly formed dungeons like this, which hadn't been sufficiently investigated, were the most dangerous of all.

Hawkins reached the conference room door. He straightened his posture before he knocked.

Regardless, it's going to get busy around here.

As Hawkins took part in the meeting with Lord Bentler's envoy, he made a decision.

By the time the five of us returned to Darion, we'd been covered in sweat, sand, and monster fluids. Despite the grime, we'd made our way to the Guild, and now we were on the first floor, selling our materials and handing over our Demonic Stones to Guild personnel.

“Hey, Zelphy,” one of the staff members called. “You think you can stop by the second floor after you’re done with that? We’ve run into a bit of a problem, and we’d like to discuss some things with you.”

Zelphy gave the staff member a troubled look, clearly catching on to the fact that yet another thorny issue was headed her way.

“Now look here,” she said, irritated. “I’m in the middle of instructing. You can’t just keep pulling me off the job. What is it this time?”

First a bandit problem, second a territorial dispute, and now this, I mused. Zelphy sure gets summoned often for extraneous issues like this... And she’s supposed to be exclusive to us for this instruction period too!

“Well...” the staff member said reluctantly, “the thing is, it looks like there’s another dungeon. And even if we wanted to scrounge up a force to go conquer it, we’re still in the middle of subjugating the other one. We’re short-staffed.”

The mention of a dungeon immediately invoked a clamor from inside the Jewel. Apparently, they thought that if Zelphy was going to participate, the rest of my party would as well.

“A dungeon!” the second head cheered. “Nice. And we might even have a chance at it...”

“It’s always a possibility,” the third head said in a considering tone.

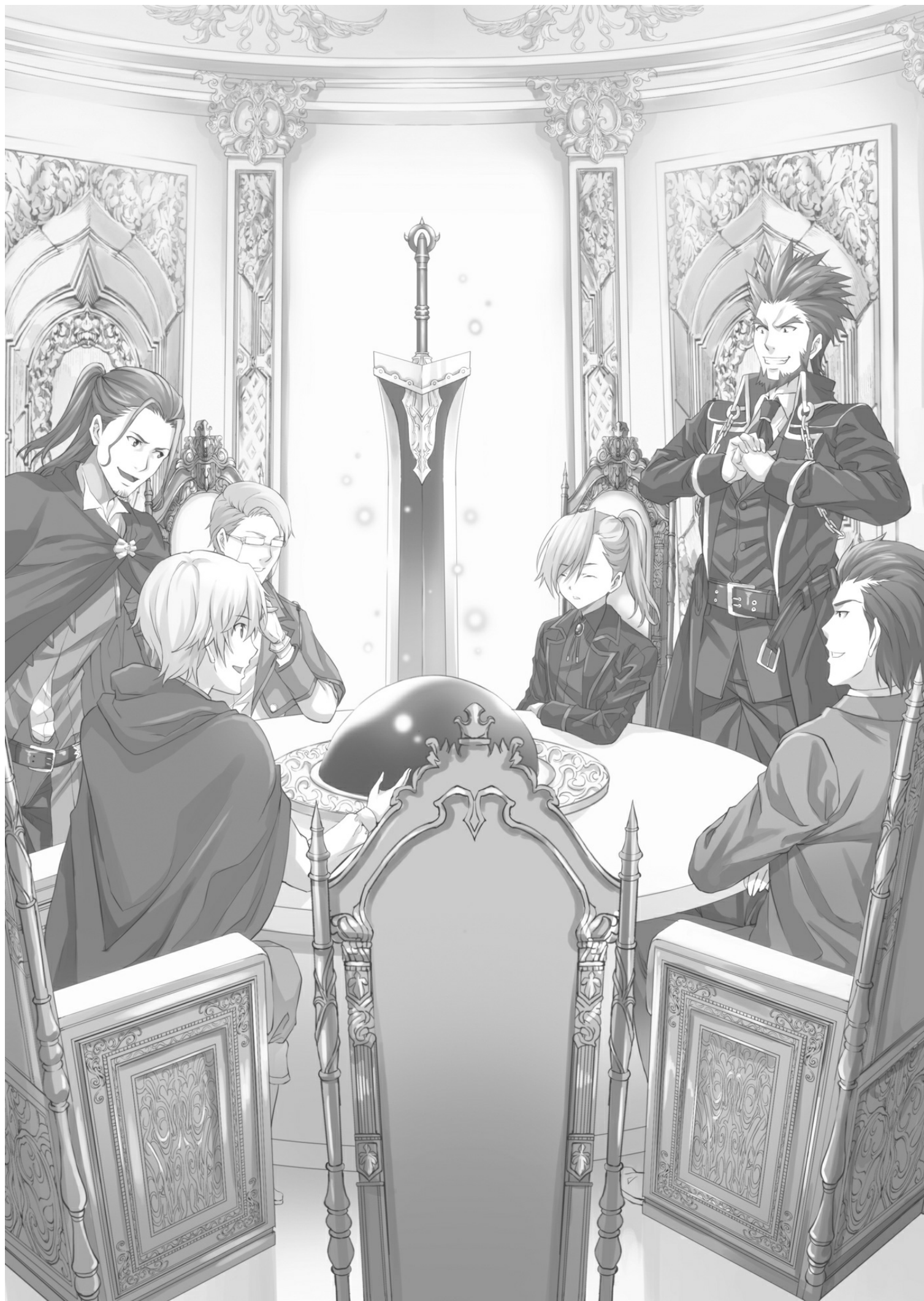
“Hmm, then we’ll need to start preparing,” the fourth head said thoughtfully.

The fifth head crossed his arms over his chest. “They could at least let us take this one.”

“Oh, I can’t wait!” the sixth head cried.

The seventh head nodded. “It really is exhilarating.”

As far as I’d heard, dungeons were a real headache for whichever lord’s territory they popped up in. But not for heads of House Walt—for them, a dungeon appearance was a cause for celebration. They sounded like they simply couldn’t wait to take a crack at it.



To be honest... I thought reluctantly, I think I've started to agree with them. If we could clear that dungeon in a timely fashion, it could be a really lucrative venture.

"Come on, Lyle! Get in on it," the third head urged me.

Guess they're not going to waste any time listening to my opinion on the matter, I thought ruefully.

"Umm." I reached out to Zelphy, trying to get her attention. "Can I take part in those discussions? It sounds kinda fun."

The staff member and Zelphy both turned to me, their faces etched with complete disbelief. Zelphy covered her face with her hand.

"Well," she said, sounding thoroughly fed up, "you might want to sit in, seeing as how you're my client and all. If I'm going to be forced to take part, it would save me the trouble of explaining it to you later. But fun...? Fun?! Dungeons are *not* a game."

"I-I'm sorry..." I stammered, not really understanding what had made her so mad. I hadn't expected her to respond like that since my ancestors made dungeons sound like such a blast.

Zelphy was about to spell it out for me, but she gave up before she even began.

"No, don't worry about it," she said, sighing and waving a hand. "That lecture's going to be a long one. But before any of that..."

Zelphy turned back to the staff member and arranged for us to attend the dungeon discussions after we visited the bathhouse. It was going to be a lot easier to settle down and concentrate once we were feeling refreshed and had been scrubbed clean of all the dirt and grime we'd accumulated during the day's hunt.

Once the five of them visited the bathhouse, Zelphy and Lyle headed to the dungeon discussion, and Novem, Aria, and Sophia headed their separate ways. The three girls weren't apart for long, however—once they completed their

personal business, they met back up at a café with a calming ambience.

The plan was to eat once Lyle joined them, so Novem just ordered drinks to kill time.

From her place in the café's window seat, Novem looked out over the street. As she watched, she saw city folk pinching their noses and scowling at the adventurers who had just returned to the city. Their reaction was no surprise—few wanted anything to do with adventurers covered in sweat, mud, and blood.

In most cities, the Guild was situated near an entrance, so city folk wouldn't have to deal with gory adventurers. Darion's Guild was a little different, in that it was located in an ever-expanding city; the Guild had once been located at the edge, but gradually more buildings had been built beyond it until it had sunk farther into the center of the city.

Novem was still idly taking in the sights when Aria decided to strike up a conversation.

"Is Lyle...up to another one of his schemes?" she asked, her face planted against the table.

"Can you do something about your posture before we discuss that?" Sophia asked primly. She was sitting properly at the table, sipping juice. "Looking at you like that is distracting me."

Aria straightened abruptly at the stiff rebuke, and Novem giggled.

Those two have gotten a lot closer, she thought.

Ever since the interterritorial dispute had been resolved, Novem had felt the two girls softening toward each other. They weren't as awkward around one another as they'd been before, and they seemed to be gradually growing more comfortable speaking their minds.

"When you get down to it," said Novem, "Lord Lyle is a Walt by blood. Such machinations are a part of his nature."

Something seemed to pop into Sophia's head when she heard that statement. She made a conflicted face.

"I've heard something about that before," she said. "People say that House

Walt rejoices whenever they march off to conquer a dungeon, and that to the strongest lords in Banseim, those death traps are just a place to test their might. But that has to just be a rumor, right...?”

Doubt clouded Aria’s eyes as she saw how anxious Sophia was.

“Is Lyle’s house really *that* amazing?” she asked. “I mean, I’ve heard their name before, but there’s a House Walt in the imperial court as well, and I tended to hear more about them while I was living back at Central.”

If you traced the provincial House Walt back to its roots, it was a branch house which had formed from the House Walt that served the emperor in the imperial capital. Although the provincial Walts had gone independent, the House Walt in Central, which had a spot on the lowest rung of the imperial court, was technically the main house.

“I’d call them more eccentric than amazing,” Sophia explained. “But they are famous. They don’t talk about them in Central?”

Aria cocked her head. “I mean, I know they’re incredible, but I came from the imperial court. All I was ever told about them was that the provincial branch house was superior to the main one. Are there famous stories about them or something?”

Novem immediately downed her drink to wet her throat. Her eyes were sparkling. She’d been waiting for this moment her entire life.

“Since you asked about amazing anecdotes, you should know that House Walt has been overflowing with them from the moment of their founding. The founder of the provincial House Walt, Lord Basil, was a mighty hero who single-handedly laid a vicious dragon to rest, and though his son, second head Lord Crassel, did not stand out much, he laid the groundwork for the house’s future growth. It was the third head, Lord Sley, the Hero General, who led the soldiers trained by Lord Crassel into battle, stalling an army of ten thousand with only a few dozen men! And while Lord Marcus, the fourth head, fell short of the others when it came to military victories, he was magnificent when it came to managing internal affairs. Breaking down the sheer wonder of what he accomplished would take a long time to explain, so I’ll have to omit the explanation for now, but please feel free to ask me about him later. After Lord

Marcus came Lord Fredriks, the fifth head, and while there were many dishonorable rumors about him, he was known to be a *demon* on the battlefield. The sixth head was Lord Fiennes, who was a broad-minded soul said to associate with people from all walks of life; he expanded the Walt territory and proved his mettle in our nation's foreign wars. The seventh head was Lord Lyle's grandfather, Lord Brod, who earned a position as advisor to Banseim royalty, and in Banseim's era of chaos, he—"

It seemed Novem would never stop, so Aria and Sophia both raised their hands to signal their surrender. They began to shake their heads and plead for it all to be over.

"Stop! *Stop!*" shouted Aria. "I get it now. Lyle comes from an amazing house! I get it!"

Sophia cleared her throat and shifted the trajectory of the conversation. "St- Still, he sure is taking his time... I thought they were only meeting to confirm if we could take part in the dungeon subjugation or not. I doubt they're discussing details already."

At this reminder that Lyle had yet to return from the Guild, Novem tilted her head curiously and placed a hand on her cheek. She still had a lot to say, but she did not intend to continue if it was uncalled for.

"Indeed," she murmured softly.

A sudden anxiety filled her.

Lyle was usually oblivious and hopeless, but when push came to shove, he always proved how reliable he could be.

It's so endearing when he gets all motivated and acts like he can resolve any and every problem thrust before him. I wonder if that side of him came out during the discussions? Novem sighed. *I hope it goes well, but...I pray he hasn't caused any problems...*

Novem looked back out the window and began to wait for Lyle once more, her heart heavy with concern.

It seems I have six sullen adventurers on my hands, I thought wryly as shouting erupted from the Jewel.

“You’ve got to be screwing with me!”

“This is unforgivable. Absolutely unforgivable!”

“Inconceivable, even!”

“Hmph...”

“How could this be...?”

“This is why adventurers are...!”

Although I’d managed to get myself a seat at the dungeon discussion, the result of the talk had left all six of them completely enraged.

Zelphy and Hawkins looked at me tiredly.

“The results should have been obvious, Lyle,” Zelphy said, exasperated. “How could we possibly send you into a dungeon when you’re still in your instructional period?”

Once we’d arrived at the discussion, I’d noticed that Zelphy hadn’t been the only adventurer who was summoned. There’d been another veteran adventurer there—he served as an instructor too. All the other skilled adventurers were still throwing themselves at the other dungeon and were not available.

I faithfully represented the opinions of my ancestors by voicing my desire to take part, but...

“Lyle, this is something I simply can’t approve of,” Hawkins said firmly. “We may be short on hands, but your party is inexperienced. In Darion, we are firmly opposed to exposing parties like yours to extreme danger.”

I flinched at Hawkins’s incredibly sensible response.

My ancestors, however, could not have cared less. They’d been looking forward to challenging the dungeon so much, and now they’d had the chance snatched away from them. They were livid.

The other veteran adventurer and instructor looked over at me with a chuckle. He was a middle-aged man with black hair, tanned skin, and a

protruding belly.

“You’re training up some spirited young’uns, Zelphy,” he said with a smile. “Reminds me of when you were younger.”

Apparently, the man’s name was Darrel. I’d soon discovered that he liked to fight with a spear, and that he was one of Darion’s oldest veteran adventurers. He had close to twenty years of experience, and even Zelphy respected him.

At the reference to her youth, Zelphy’s face screwed up into a snarl. “Oh, shut it, you old codger! I’m not the girl I used to be!”

So apparently Zelphy has an embarrassing past, and Darrel knows all about it since he met her when she was first starting out, I thought. Maybe Zelphy’s just bad at handling people like him in general...

Darrel looked me up and down, then nodded.

“From foolish noble scion to womanizer—I’ve heard all sorts of rumors,” he commented. He folded his arms and ran a hand through his beard. “Now that I’m looking at you, I guess you’re not *too* bad. How about you let him take part, Hawkins?”

Dismay burst over Hawkins’s face. “Darrel, that’s a bit—”

“We’re leaving,” Zelphy interrupted. She violently ruffled up her hair, then grabbed me by the arm and made her way out of the conference room. “Oh, and I’m not participating either. You two can talk all you want without me.”

“Zelphy, please wait,” I cried in protest, but I was forcibly dragged from the room.

The door shut behind us. Zelphy took notably larger steps as she stormed down the corridor.

“Wh-Why can’t I take part...?” I asked her timidly.

“Because you can’t,” she said harshly. Her opinion didn’t budge an inch. “Now that you’ve finally started earning a decent wage, you’re letting it get to your head. You need to get some more experience first. Dungeons are no cakewalk—only an outright idiot would send you to challenge one in your current state.”

“Huh?!” the second head cried.

My other ancestors didn't seem any more accepting of this opinion.

So apparently from Zelphy's point of view, my ancestors are all idiots, I thought, slightly amused.

"Listen to me," Zelphy insisted, recapturing my attention. "Each dungeon has its own characteristics. Vast or narrow, loads of monsters or barely a few—you won't know until you go inside. The variations are so extreme that there's no guaranteed method to succeed at tackling one. You seriously expect me to throw newbies like your party into it and have any expectation of them doing well?" Zelphy sighed. "Fine, scratch that. *You* might be able to pull it off, Lyle. It's the others who are the problem."

It seems Zelphy's evaluation of me has gone up over the past few months, I thought happily. She knows I can use multiple Arts, but apparently that's not enough to go dungeon crawling.

"Novem gets a pass," Zelphy continued, "but Sophia and Aria are only slightly above amateur level. Add me in, and you've only got five members. That's not enough."

"Then it's fine if you have the numbers?" the third head said enthusiastically. "Lyle, I have an idea."

I listened as the third head explained his plan, then relayed it as my own proposal.

"How about I ask a party I know to help us out?" I asked Zelphy. "I think eight members should be enough."

But Zelphy didn't budge.

"I said no," she said firmly, "and that's that. Get yourself home today and then rest tomorrow. *Good night.*"

She turned her back to me, waved a hand, and walked off.

I was left standing alone by the second-floor counters.

The raging voices of my ancestors roared back to life, unquelled by my argument with Zelphy.

"You want us to let such a prime opportunity slip by?!" the seventh head

roared. “Last time, we were forced to give up, but there’s nothing stopping us now! And this will be Lyle’s first campaign! It’ll be glorious! All adventurers do is get in the way—*that’s* why I hate them.”

“I agree,” the second head said, revealing his own take on the matter. “This is something you should experience sooner rather than later. It’s good to know how far your skills can get you.”

The third head sounded mortified that his own proposal had been rejected. “They’re acting so strange,” he complained. “It should be more than possible for you to tackle a dungeon with your current members. You’ve even gone through Growth—you should be able to use our Arts better than ever before!”

The Jewel, which housed the revived memories of my ancestors, was also a superior support item—it taught me, its wielder, how to reproduce the ancient Arts my ancestors had once used. In order to reproduce these abilities of old, it revived the memories of my ancestors. My mana was what sustained these memories, so whenever they made a ruckus, they would drain me more and more dry. In my opinion, it was kind of a cursed item.

I let out a sigh, deciding to head to the shop where Novem was waiting for me.

We’ll meet up and eat, and then we’ll have to figure out what we should do tomorrow...

The sixth head let out a cryptic laugh. “Well, gentlemen... Why don’t we calm down for now? The right to the dungeon lies with Lord Bentler, and the Guild is only moving at the lord’s behest. If it’s a Guild decision, we have no choice but to obey.”

He’s being awfully obedient today, I thought.

Then, the other ancestors broke into ominous laughs of their own.

The third head sounded even darker and more unaffected than usual. “Oh, *of course*. If the Guild says no, there’s nothing we can do... Yes, let’s give up. But you know... No one ever said we couldn’t rely on the old lordy.”

“We haven’t asked for a bonus for that stupid request yet,” the fifth head muttered.

The seventh head, who was now in high spirits, added, "He *did* abuse your reputation. You should be compensated appropriately for that. Now then, Lyle... I think we have our plans for tomorrow."

Apparently, I was going to negotiate with Lord Bentler directly.

My ancestors are a little scary, I thought...and it seemed the second head agreed.

"You're kinda scaring me, guys."

Chapter 31: Subjugation Preparation

Early the next morning, I dropped by the manor of the Lord of Darion, Baron Bentler Lobernia. Since I was an uninvited guest, I was made to wait a few dozen minutes before the lord appeared before me, accompanied by his retainers.

“What brings you here at this hour, Lyle?” the lord asked me.

Lord Bentler was a short, stout man who looked well-meaning at first glance, but my ancestors insisted he was more than he seemed. By now, I knew they weren’t wrong—I’d seen a sneakier side to him several times since I’d come to Darion, like when he’d sent me off to deal with that tense territorial dispute between House Pagan and House Maini, or further back when he’d punished Aria’s father for colluding with the bandits.

At the lord’s words, I climbed to my feet and offered an apology for my discourtesy before quickly making my way through the formalities. Once I was done, I offered the lord the most refreshing smile I could conjure up.

I hadn’t done this on my own volition, of course. All my actions were done at the sixth head’s request.

“That’s right, *smile*,” he told me from his place inside the Jewel. “Never let that smile falter.”

And so, with the sixth head enthusiastically egging me on, I began my negotiations with Lord Bentler.

“Getting right to the point,” I began, “I heard that a new dungeon was discovered, and that it appears to have only recently manifested. I would like to take part in its subjugation, if at all possible.”

Lord Bentler scratched his cheek with his fingertip. “How should I put this...? Unfortunately, I have already entrusted the dungeon’s handling to the Guild. I no longer have any say in the matter.”

True enough, I thought. *Since he’s already delegated the task to the Guild, he*

can't exactly meddle in their operation. But surely he still has some sort of authority. The land belongs to him, after all.

"He's trying to drive you off because he doesn't want to deal with you," the sixth head said, amused. "But too bad! We Walts have always been a persistent bunch."

Is that supposed to be a good thing...? I muttered internally.

"Under normal circumstances," Lord Bentler continued, "I would have dispatched my knights and soldiers to take care of the dungeon, but they've only just returned from their last subjugation. It would be cruel of me to send them out again so soon. If you must insist upon participating, I would recommend talking to the Guild—"

"That aside," I interrupted him, pretending to have recalled something, "that last request you sent me on, the one where I had to handle that dispute with House Pagan? It really sent a shiver down my spine. Why, if I'd taken one wrong step, I'd have been caught in the middle of a war! I'm sure glad nothing came of it..."

Lord Bentler's brow twitched. "I already paid you for your efforts."

"Ah, yes, House Pagan *is* one of your precious vassals, after all," I said, still smiling brightly as I spread my arms wide. "And I did absolutely everything in my power to help them. How did that turn out for you, exactly...?"

Lord Bentler sighed and sank deeper into the sofa. One of the retainers standing behind him glared at me, and I met him with a beaming smile.

I'll be honest with you, I thought at him. *I want me to leave too.*

"Shortly after you left, we received a letter from Lord Pagan," Lord Bentler admitted, meeting my eyes. "It seems he's reconsidered his stance on the relationship between our two houses. Although the change might be gradual, I'm sure he will someday fulfill his role as my vassal. You certainly achieved more than I had expected."

I nodded in reply, still smiling widely. At last, Lord Bentler waved me toward the sofa opposite him, and I took a seat.

“So, what are you trying to do, Lyle?” the lord said, giving me a conflicted look. “Do you just want me to increase your reward, or are you really planning to conquer the dungeon? Or do you have something entirely different in mind...?”

“I have no other plans,” I replied honestly. There was no reason to hide my intentions. “I simply want to participate in the dungeon’s subjugation. I do not wish for anything more from you than your help in achieving that goal.”

Lord Bentler’s expression shifted from conflicted to perplexed. “Are you sure about that? I know that some people see dungeons as a way to earn a quick buck, but it’s a hit-or-miss business. Plenty of dungeons don’t have rewards at all—in that case, you’ll have put in a good deal of effort for nothing.”

My ancestor’s voices exploded to life.

“Challenging a dungeon’s a valuable chance to test your abilities!”

“Yeah, exactly!”

“I prefer activities that result in more hits than misses. Regardless, it’s a good way to train.”

“As soon as you find a dungeon, you should just dive right in, right?”

“That whelp Bentler just doesn’t get it! He doesn’t get it at all!”

“Can you really call yourself a man if you don’t rush straight into the first dungeon you see? That’s just how things like this work.”

My ancestors clearly saw things quite differently than Lord Bentler did.

You know, I thought, this has been bothering me for a while, but do my ancestors have any room to talk, telling me I lack common sense...? They don’t exactly have the best instincts themselves, do they?

“Don’t you ever feel happy when you find a new dungeon, Lord Bentler?” I asked him. I couldn’t help myself.

Lord Bentler’s head dropped into his hands. “I guess you really are a Walt.”

“Huh?” My brow crinkled.

Seeing my confusion, the lord indifferently went on, “To most lords, a

dungeon is nothing but trouble. Personally, the treasure appeals to me, but it hurts my head to think of how many sacrifices would have to be made just to obtain it. It's not like you can turn a profit every time you tackle a dungeon either. Despite that, if one forms and is discovered in your territory, you can't just ignore it—the cost of leaving it be without intervention would be astronomical. The pros to clearing it outweigh the cons every time.”

From what I'd heard, if a dungeon was left to its own devices for too long, the monster population within it would grow too large to contain. As a result, the dungeon would expel the monsters forth into the surrounding area, and they'd run rampant. Thousands—no, tens of thousands—of monsters would emerge all at once. Small towns and villages would be swallowed up by the wave in the blink of an eye. When it got really bad, the horde could even fell whole nations.

I'd heard that divine beasts—beings that weren't exactly monsters, but weren't quite human either—would go around destroying dungeons from time to time, but it wouldn't be wise for a lord to count on their assistance.

“So that's how most lords see dungeons, huh?”

Lord Bentler gave me a firm nod. “It is indeed! Admittedly, I don't know the inner workings of other houses, but I can tell you few would regard dungeons as a source of entertainment.”

I pinched the Jewel between my fingertips, contemplating this answer. My ancestors started speaking again, but they didn't sound so confident this time—they almost sounded like they were getting evasive.

“Th-That's strange. A dungeon appearance was celebrated like a festival back in my day...”

“It's easy to deal with dungeons if they haven't been around long. What's the problem?”

“It's not like dungeons are the only way to make money...”

“Is that...how the other houses always saw it?”

“Sounds like they need to take the time to dream a bit more.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

I knew it... I thought. The Walts are the abnormal ones.

“Have it your way,” Lord Bentler went on. “I’ll put a word in for you with the Guild. Whatever happens after that is beyond my control, however. The dungeon truly is a Guild matter now.”

I took my leave from Lord Bentler’s estate after that, but though I’d achieved what I’d set out to do, I found I was left with a few questions about the things my ancestors held dear.

Not long after my visit with Lord Bentler, I headed toward Ciel, the sweet shop Aria had once worked at. It was a great place to hide and have a secret snack.

I’d invited two acquaintances to meet me there—Rondo the swordsman and Ralph the spear wielder. I’d come to know both men over the time I’d been in Darion; we periodically met up at Ciel and shared a table, where we’d chat about various things. I’d thought I might as well discuss the joint dungeon operation I had in mind for our two parties over a bit of cake.

I laid my story out for them. I quickly got the impression that Rondo, who was a sociable young man with a refreshing vibe to him, seemed more interested in what I had to say than the cake resting on the table before him.

Once I had finished my explanation, Rondo said, “I see. As I recall, your party has five members. Ours has three, so that would make us a sizable party of eight.” He took a sip of the slightly bitter tea to wash the sweetness from his mouth, then asked, “That said, is tackling a dungeon really possible for a party like ours...? And even if we did agree to join you so suddenly, the details of the dungeon haven’t been investigated yet...”

Ralph, who had a bit of a sweet tooth, took a break from scarfing down cake to voice a more favorable opinion of my idea. “Sounds good to me,” he said cheerfully, in stark contrast to Rondo’s more worried tone. “Our party wouldn’t be able to take part in the subjugation on our own, but if we work together, I think everything will work out pretty well.” He glanced toward Rondo.

“Personally, I’d like to team up with Lyle’s party. I want to experience what a dungeon’s like sooner rather than later, and I won’t get another chance to go

dungeon-crawling like this anytime soon.”

The third member of Ralph and Rondo’s party was a magician named Rachel, but she wasn’t with them at the moment.

Rondo thought for a bit, sipping at his tea. Rondo was the leader of their three-person party, so naturally decisions about their course of action fell to him.

“To tell you the truth, we’re not aiming to make money on this expedition,” I told them. “Our main goal is just to participate in the subjugation of the dungeon, and maybe rack up a few achievements along the way.”

“What?!” Ralph asked, sounding a bit disappointed. “It wouldn’t hurt you to be a bit more greedy, ya know. If you want to provide for those cuties of yours, you need to push yourself a little harder.”

I locked my eyes with his, clearing my throat purposefully. “Now look here,” I said firmly. “I’m not dating Aria *or* Sophia. It’s not like that. I’m not looking after them either.”

Ralph gave me a smug grin. “I sure hope it stays that way,” he shot back. “More importantly, Rondo, what are we going to do?”

For a moment, Rondo just looked up at the ceiling. Then he folded his arms, straightened his posture, and looked straight into my eyes. “We’ll do it,” he said. “But I have a few conditions.”

I straightened in my chair as well. “That’s understandable,” I told him. “Go right ahead.”

“Thank you,” Rondo replied. “First, I’ll need a guarantee from you that the Guild will agree to us participating in the subjugation. Otherwise, our preparations will be for nothing. Second, I’ll need to know when you think the finer details of the expedition will be completely worked out. Finally, our party will want to play an active role in battle. We won’t want to just carry supplies around—that’s no fun.”

After I’d nodded to each request, Rondo let out a relieved chuckle. “Sounds good,” he said. “Though we still don’t have enough info to start planning just yet. There’s always the chance that I’ll have to back out based on the

information we get on the dungeon...but regardless, thank you for the invitation.”

“All right!” Ralph cheered, clenching his fist triumphantly. “We’re one step closer to the dream!”

I looked between the two of them, suddenly curious. “Dream?” I asked.

“Yeah, we have a dream, or maybe it would be better to call it a goal,” Rondo explained bashfully. “We’re adventurers and all, so we ought to aim for the top, don’t you think? If possible, we’d like to work out of the Free City of Baym. I think I told you before, but that place is the real deal.”

I’d definitely heard of the Free City of Baym before—the place was a trade hub that was said to be the true home of all adventurers.

“We plan to keep working and get our name out there,” Ralph added. “We might be losing to you now, Lyle, but eventually, we’ll get more members and become a party whose name is on the tip of everyone’s tongues.”

And with that, both men stood from their seats.

“All right, I’m going to go and talk this out with Rachel,” Rondo said. “Lyle, keep us in the loop, okay?”

They quickly paid and left, leaving it up to me to polish off the rest of the cake. As I ate, the second head spoke up, giving me his opinion on Rondo and Ralph.

“You’ve made some good friends, Lyle,” he commented. “Having a goal to work toward is a positive thing.”

“Are those two...really my friends?” I asked softly.

The second head chuckled. “They are. And on top of that they’re optimistic and skilled—they have a lot of potential. You might even end up running into them again after you’ve left Darion.”

His words made me remember that one day soon, Rondo and his party were going to leave Darion behind. From what he and Ralph had told me, once they’d made all the preparations here they felt they could, they had every intention of setting off to their next destination.

The knowledge of their impending departure brought memories of the founder to the front of my mind. A slight pain built up in my chest.

The fourth head must have noticed that I was growing upset, since he spoke up and told me, “Don’t be so down, Lyle. As long as you keep on living, you’ll have the chance to meet them again.”

I nodded, finishing off the last bite of cake. I thought of how the second head had called Rondo and Ralph my friends, and my sad feelings ebbed. As I sat there, I felt a bit bashful and a bit happy all at the same time.

Now that I had spoken to Rondo, I had a few more things I wanted to prepare during my day off. But before I could do any of that, I had to deliver the letter Lord Bentler had written for me to the Guild. It contained his written approval for me to participate in the subjugation of the new dungeon.

“Now that I have Lord Bentler’s permission,” I asked my ancestors as I walked down the deserted path to the Guild, “is there anything else I need to do?”

A voice quickly responded from within the Jewel—it was the third head. “You’re short on information for the moment,” he told me, “so just tell them you’re going to participate and leave it at that. The news will reach Zelphy by tomorrow, I’m sure. Oh, I can’t wait to see her response.”

Is Zelphy going to fly into a rage when she hears about what I’ve done? I wondered, still wandering down the street. I mean, I went out and gathered comrades and even met with the local lord, all for the purpose of taking part in the dungeon subjugation. I shivered. Well, if she does, I don’t want to be anywhere near her.

That’s when I spotted Novem, who appeared to be out shopping.

“Ah, Novem,” I called out.

Novem turned and waved. I noticed then that she had Aria and Sophia with her, and all three girls were laden with a fair amount of shopping bags.

Something about the sight completely changed the fourth head’s demeanor. “Lyle!” he cried, voice fraught with danger. “Incoming! Those girls look like

they're heading home after a shopping trip. Are you prepared to face them?"

Am I...prepared to face them...? I felt the urge to tilt my head in confusion, but I managed to contain it, tapping the Jewel and letting it roll around in my hand instead.

"You have to compliment them!" the fourth head exploded. "Now that they've finished shopping, you've got to praise them, and tell them how differently they look than they normally do!"

Seriously, give me a break, I thought at him. *My mana increased after my Growth, but it still drains pretty fast when you shout like that. Anyways, why are you acting so scared of the girls...?*

At that point, I felt more confused than enlightened by the fourth head's lecture.

"Here they come!" the fourth head concluded. "Don't let your guard down!"

"You should listen to him," the fifth head said in a rather condescending tone. "Those are the words of a hen-pecked husband."

That's a pretty mocking tone for someone who's telling me to follow someone else's advice, I thought wryly. *Come to think of it, the fifth head doesn't talk about himself or his circumstances much. I'll have to ask him about them one of these days.*

The three girls had drawn pretty close to me by now, and I noticed the fourth head had been right—they *were* dressed differently than when they would be if they were going out hunting monsters. Novem had taken off her robe, as had Aria, which left a bit of their skin on display.

Sophia had taken off her robe as well, but she wore a long-sleeved shirt and a floor-length skirt underneath it, so her skin was no more exposed than usual. She didn't have her battle-axe either; something about its absence made her feel a bit less intimidating.

She does look quite different than usual, though...

"You headed out early today, milord," Novem said. "Have you finished your business yet?"

I shook my head. “No, I’m headed off to do the most crucial part right now. What about you three? What are you out shopping for today?”

“Just day-to-day stuff,” Aria said, hoisting up her bags. “Clothes and whatnot. I can’t just always buy things for my weapons and armor, right?”

I gave a hum of agreement.

“Lyle,” the fourth head murmured softly, “start by complimenting them on how they’re dressed. That should be enough for today.” There was an almost defeated tone to his voice, like he’d realized there was no point in asking too much of me.

I scratched at my cheek, then finally said, “It’s kind of refreshing to see you all like this. I’m only ever around when you guys are dressed to head out monster hunting, and once we’re back...” I paused in contemplation. “The clothes you wear when you come out of the bathhouse still feel a bit different than these, I guess.”

It was a rather simple compliment, but the moment I finished, Aria gave a little spin to show off her outfit. “Y-You really think so?” she asked. “I wasn’t sure at first whether I should buy this outfit or not, since it was a bit expensive. Sophia looks cute too, doesn’t she?”

I glanced over at Sophia, who was fidgeting. The shirt she was wearing over her long skirt was accented with lace. It was quite different from her normal robe, but it still seemed to convey her diligent nature.

“I think her outfit suits her,” I told Aria.

“Thank you!” Sophia replied. She looked rather embarrassed—her face had gone bright red.

I glanced over at Novem next. She smiled back at me. She was wearing her typical ensemble, having only removed her robe.

How troublesome, I thought. What am I supposed to compliment her on...? Her skirt and shirt are the same... Maybe her shoes are new? No, I think I’ve seen her wearing those already, so... I slumped. I’ve got no idea what to say.

“Try complimenting her hair,” the fourth head advised. “She’s braided the

base of her ponytail today.”

I seized onto his advice. “Your hairstyle’s nice today,” I told Novem. “It’s a little different than usual.”

Novem gave me a soft smile. “Thank you, milord. Oh, that’s right! Would you like to eat with us? It seems it’s about time for lunch already.”

It was indeed a fine time for lunch, but I’d only just eaten cake.

“Sorry,” I said, grimacing. “I was just eating cake with Rondo.”

“Sounds nice,” Aria commented, looking a bit disappointed. “You went to Ciel then, right? I can’t really go there anymore.”

I should have bought them some takeout, I thought.

Ciel was like a secret haven for men who loved sweets—they’d grow nervous whenever a female customer came in. Aria seemed overly mindful of this fact. She couldn’t bring herself to go in, even though she’d used to work there.

“I’m going to go ahead and get going,” I told the girls, pointing down the road. “I’ve got some business at the Guild I have to take care of. See you later!”

We parted ways, and I set my course for the second floor of the Guild.

After Sophia, Novem, and Aria parted ways with Lyle, they’d found themselves a suitable place to eat lunch. The store had been crowded when they arrived, but they’d eventually been able to place their orders after fighting through all the hustle and bustle.

Now the three girls sat at a table, waiting for their food to arrive.

Even without her robe, Sophia was overdressed for the weather. Sweat poured down her face, and she wiped it away with a handkerchief.

“What business do you reckon Lyle has at the Guild?” Sophia asked, bringing up the question at the forefront of her mind. “If it’s a job, we might want to help him out.”

Aria had been looking around the store, but this question caused her eyes to focus on Novem. “Did he tell you anything, Novem?” she asked. “I guess he

could've gone to the Guild to complain since they didn't allow us to take part in that dungeon stuff, but that didn't seem to be what he had planned..."

Novem smiled at Aria from her seat, which she was perched on with perfect posture. "As far as I'm aware of, he hasn't taken on any jobs," she said, "and though he wanted to enter the dungeon, he didn't seem too disappointed by the Guild's refusal. Regardless, I think he'll manage just fine without our help."

Sophia brought a finger to her lips, hanging her head in thought. "It's been bothering me for a while now," she murmured to herself. "But why would someone want to go into a dungeon as badly as Lyle does...? I mean, I understand that some people want to conquer a dungeon because they think it'll allow them to get rich quick, and I don't intend to crush their dreams, but...Lyle doesn't seem too fixated on money..." Sophia trailed off, frustrated at her inability to make her point clearly.

"Are you sure about that?" Aria refuted. "While we were out handling that territorial dispute, he said he wanted to be the first person to go inside the dungeon. I guess it could be some sort of man thing, or something...? I don't really understand what gets Lyle motivated, to be honest. He's usually so listless, but when you get him worked up, he's like an entirely different person..."

Aria hadn't been able to express herself very well either, and she looked at the other two girls for confirmation they'd understood.

Maybe it's a Walt tradition, Sophia thought. That could be why he wants to prove himself inside a dungeon. But even though he tried to force his way onto the subjugation team, he didn't really seem all that motivated to participate... He's a strange one—I mean, he's seriously lacking in common sense. I'm not really one to talk, but he's definitely worse off than me. And even though he's capable of achieving some really incredible things when he gets serious, the gap between that side of him and his usual self feels way too big...

Novem spoke up, breaking off Sophia's line of thought. "House Walt aside, dungeon subjugation is important for all adventurers. That sort of work is a big part of an adventurer's job. In fact, you can be pretty confident in saying that dungeon subjugation is the first thing people think about when you mention the

adventurer trade.”

There were many popular stories that involved an adventurer protagonist discovering a legendary weapon in the deepest depths of a dungeon. Many a young adventurer hoarded dreams of having such an experience themselves—there was no guarantee that Lyle was not among them.

The real world was not so kind as the one in stories, however. Most young adventurers chasing such dreams would find they only led to a premature death. Darion had many young adventurers—that’s why the members of the Darion Adventurers’ Guild had to go through such an extensive process to be selected for dungeon excursions. Most other Guilds did not have such restrictive qualifications.

“It’s a common enough tale for a noble scion without inheritance rights to become an adventurer in order to make a quick profit,” Novem continued. “Most of their moneymaking schemes involve dungeons. And actually, conquering a dungeon may be one of the inevitable hurdles we’ll face in order to make a name for ourselves as adventurers.”

Aria stretched out in her seat. “Life has been surprisingly uneventful ever since I became an adventurer,” she commented. “Our party isn’t hunting down fairy-tale monsters, or taking on hard requests. As far as I can tell, even if those jobs are around, no one will allow us to take them.”

Aria was right—their party still lacked credibility because of the few accomplishments they had under their belt. That lack meant they were barred from the sort of jobs adventurer youths dreamed of.

I wouldn’t say my time as an adventurer has been uneventful, though, Sophia thought. When she recalled everything that had happened to her since she’d met Lyle, she was surprised to find she’d done quite a few things that’d she’d only heard of happening in adventurer tales. Still, Lyle’s reputation in Darion was dubious at best, and their party didn’t have a gaudy moniker like the ones in the storybooks. It seems my adventures still fall a little short of the ones in my hopes and dreams.

“It will be all right,” Novem said, giggling. “If you stick with Lord Lyle, I’m sure —”

“Sorry to keep you waiting!” their waiter cried.

And so their food was delivered, and the conversation moved on to new topics...

The next day, my party gathered on the Guild’s second floor at Hawkins’s request. He led us to a meeting room from there—once we were inside, I could immediately tell the atmosphere was terrible. Zelphy glared daggers at me, while Rondo’s party stood silently, waiting to see how things panned out. Hawkins, meanwhile, wrapped his hands around his head, a troubled look on his face.

A pang of remorse went through me—I felt bad for putting the towering man in such an uncomfortable position.

Aria must have decided to get some answers out of me, since she nudged me with an elbow and asked, “Hey, what’s up with the grim mood in here?”

“Well, you see...” I said slowly, “I might have done a bit of politicking.”

Hawkins cleared his throat. “There are lots of things I would like to say, but I’ll start with what’s most important. Lyle, your party has been issued permission to participate in the subjugation of the new dungeon that has appeared. You will be allowed to participate jointly with another party, so Rondo and his team have received permission as well.”

Once she heard that, Sophia turned and began to stare at me, examining me closely. Rondo’s party just seemed happy that they would be able to participate at all.

“Don’t tell me *this* is the reason you went to the Guild yesterday...” Sophia muttered.

I nodded, averting my eyes from hers. “I asked Lord Bentler to put in a good word for me, and requested that Rondo’s party team up with us before I stopped by the Guild.”

Now even Novem was looking at me with surprise. I felt a twinge of guilt for going forward with my plan without talking to her, but my ancestors couldn’t

have been happier.

“All right! Now we just need to get briefed, and then we can start preparing!”

“Nothing is impossible, as long as the Walts are involved.”

“We should probably make a decent profit...”

“And hopefully, the monsters won’t be that cute...”

“For starters, you’ll need food and weapons. There’s a lot of things to do!”

“That’s right! And though we’ve participated in dungeon subjugations before as lords, there’s no guarantee that adventurers do things the same way. Make sure you check in with Zelphy on that front. Though I’m not that enthusiastic about you confronting her...”

Oh, give me a break, I thought. Of course I’ve got to ask the woman who’s glaring at me for help. She’s even shaking, she’s so mad!

“With that out of the way,” Hawkins went on, “we’ll move on to talking about the supplemental information we’ve gathered on the dungeon. It emerged within a forest, and is relatively small in scale.”

I nodded. I knew enough to understand that when he referred to the dungeon’s scale, he was referring to how many floors it possessed, not how big it was in general. Some dungeons had floors that went downward, and some had floors that went upward, but as long as the number of floors was under ten, it was considered to be of small scale. If a dungeon had more than ten floors, it was considered mid-scale, and if it had more than fifty floors, it was considered large scale.

“According to reports,” Hawkins continued, “the dungeon has only one floor, though it is vast, and the monsters inside include goblins, orcs, and several varieties of insect monster. Shifting appears to be minor, but the dungeon is still subject to some changes. You should remain wary of such an occurrence happening.”

So even though the dungeon is vast, they still determined that it was small scale since it only has one floor, I thought. And it could possibly shift—I should remember that.

When dungeons shifted, they altered their internal layouts—this could include rooms, corridors, and more—so they were more difficult for invaders to clear. From what Hawkins had said, this dungeon didn't shift often, but I'd still have to be cautious.

"This time, the dungeon subjugation will be entirely a Guild endeavor," Hawkins explained, flicking through the documents in his hands. "We've put in a request for rear support, as well as for a sutler to provide our people with rations of food during the journey to the dungeon's location. The Guild has officially endorsed a sutler named Byron, so I would not recommend patronizing any other merchants if they do show up. Not that any of them will, since most of them have gathered over at the other dungeon."

Zelphy's face puckered when she heard that.

Sutlers were apparently merchants who followed adventurers, mercenaries, and armies while they were away from home. They sold people provisions while they were out in the field. From what I'd heard, they'd show up whether you wanted them around or not.

We shouldn't see many of them, though, if Hawkins is right, I thought. If they're all busy with the other dungeon, it would make more sense for them to stay there. On top of that, that dungeon has a larger scale than the one we're tackling, which means it will probably take a longer time to conquer.

"So Old Byron's taking charge?" Zelphy asked. It seemed she was acquainted with the man—and not in a good way, based on her attitude.

"The Guild will take full responsibility for him," Hawkins assured her. "I will also be participating as a staff representative."

"You sure?" Zelphy teased. "If you ask me, that scary face of yours works best behind a desk."

"I try my best to be courteous," Hawkins said with a shrug.

It seemed the Guild kept Hawkins stationed at the receptionist counter as a deterrent against any adventurers acting out. Despite his low-key response, this was apparently a decision Hawkins was both aware and mindful of.

"Anyway," Zelphy said more seriously, "I've got to admit it's a relief having

you as our Guild staff representative. I gotta wonder what the Guild's thinking, though, sending you out into the field."

Hawkins declined to reply to this comment, diving back into his briefing instead. "The sutlers will sell you equipment on site, but you should be wary of the cost. It would be best for you to prepare yourselves properly beforehand. If in the course of your adventures you find a treasure chest, the loot inside belongs to whoever discovered it. Monster materials and Demonic Stones, however, will all be purchased from you by the Guild at a lower rate."

I've heard that the Guild buys Demonic Stones and monster materials at a special rate during dungeon subjugations, I thought. That usually means they'll be buying them off us at below market value.

"As for the treasure in the innermost chamber," Hawkins continued, "a portion will go to the Guild, and the—"

"Hold up," Ralph said, cocking his head quizzically. "You mean we get treasure if we find it, but other than that, we're earning less than usual?"

Ralph had sounded a bit anxious, so Hawkins's focus dialed in on him. "It's an exchange," Hawkins explained. "You might sell your loot at a lower rate, but the Guild will take care of all the logistical support. That means you won't have to worry about what you're going to eat, or about doing any odd jobs around the camp. I think you'll find it evens out."

Ralph had to think for a second before he was satisfied, but he eventually nodded.

Now that Hawkins had explained the process, it made sense to me too. The Guild needed some sort of compensation for the support they were going to provide us, after all.

"The next thing on the agenda will be your departure," Hawkins informed us. "We'll be dispatching you a week from today. It should take roughly two days to reach the dungeon, and it's been estimated that it will take around two weeks to conquer it."

"That's quite a long time for a small-scale dungeon!" Rondo exclaimed.

Zelphy picked up the explanation this time. "After we get to the dungeon,"

she told Rondo, “we’ll have to set up camp, secure a water source, and ensure our safety. With everything we’ll have to do, there’s no telling how much of those two weeks we’ll actually be able to spend inside the damn thing.”

Ah, I thought. So it seems we won’t be marching in as soon as we arrive.

“So we’ve still got some time left before we’ll have to depart, you said?” I asked Hawkins.

“Yes,” he agreed. “Around fifty adventurers will be let into the dungeon, but we will need to mobilize between two to three hundred people to provide support. We are working as fast as we can.”

I couldn’t conceal my shock at that one.

“They’ve gotten quite a few people on the job,” the third head said admiringly. “The Guild’s got their logistics well under control. Though I guess they can always recruit some adventurers to fill the roles they can’t get outsiders to do...”

“We never mobilized that many people when I was lord,” said the seventh head, who sounded just as curious as the third head.

So dungeon subjugation doesn’t just differ from lord to lord, I thought. It seems to differ between Guilds as well.

“This should be all the information you need,” Hawkins said, handing each of us a few sheets of paper. “Please make sure you read over all the details.”

With that done, Hawkins pronounced that he had work to attend to, and left the room in a hurry.

“You really helped us out there, Ly—” Rachel broke off at the livid look on Zelphy’s face. “I mean, *Novem*! Thanks to you, it looks like we can participate in the subjugation as well.”

“Yes...” Novem replied, a sour-looking smile on her face. “I am, of course, glad to help.”

The reason for Novem’s bitter smile was heading my way with a vengeance. Novem watched helplessly as Zelphy approached me, her grin spreading from ear to ear. The effect was rather spoiled, though, by the complete lack of humor

in her eyes.

“How about you start explaining, Lyle?” Zelphy drawled. “I thought I told you the dungeon subjugation was none of your business.”

I looked around the room, hoping for someone to save me, but everyone was already on the way out. Novem was being pulled toward the door by Aria and Sophia, with Rachel pushing her forward from behind.

In the end, Novem just sent me a helpless smile and a quick “Good luck!” before she vanished from my sight.

I began devoutly praying for my ancestors’ guidance, but the six of them were barely paying attention to me anymore.

“I can’t wait!”

“Oh, what fun!”

“Let’s get in that dungeon and find some treasure!”

“Goblins, orcs, I don’t really care. All that matters is that they’re all ours.”

“You never know, there could even be a dragon at the end of it!”

“At the very least, I’d like a gryphon.”

All of a sudden, their voices all melded together into a single roar. “*IT’S FINALLY GETTING FUN AROUND HERE!*” they cheered.

Meanwhile, I was forced to listen to their celebration as Zelphy gave me a harsh lecture. When she was finally done, she capped it off by forcing me to treat her to lunch.

Chapter 32: The Silver Weapon

Now that we had official approval, we jumped straight into our preparations under the guidance of Zelphy's watchful eye.

At the moment, I was on my way back to my inn after finishing up some shopping. I glanced over the shopping list a few more times as I walked down the crowded street, checking to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything. Before long, my gaze had flickered from the list to the brown paper bag full of food supplies I was carrying. Most of the things I'd bought had been preserved foods like cheese, but there were other items in the bag as well.

"Wasn't the guild supposed to prepare our meals for us...?" I grumbled, annoyed that I'd had to purchase anything.

That's when my ancestors spoke up to give me their advice.

The second head spoke first. "You should listen to the people with experience, like Zelphy," he said. "To be blunt, we don't know enough about how the Guild handles dungeons to weigh in on the process."

Although my ancestors had challenged dungeons before as feudal lords, this expedition would be the first time they saw how adventurers went about it. With this in mind, they'd decided we should all simply listen to those who knew more than us and obey their orders.

"I guess Lyle's situation is a bit different than ours," the sixth head muttered. "We could muster a whole army with a single word."

He must be annoyed that I have to tackle a dungeon with such a small party, I thought.

Because of their positions, my ancestors had been able to gather soldiers and support personnel from within their territory to assist them when they'd gone to subjugate a dungeon.

I certainly could use the extra help, I mused, *but I don't know anyone I can trust outside of Rondo's party.*

“That aside,” the fifth head said, cutting in and changing the topic, “don’t you think you should test that thing out? With all that’s happened, you’ve never even tried to take it out of the Jewel. I’d at least like to know if you can use it or not before you enter the dungeon.”

The “thing” he referred to was the silver weapon—the silver greatsword, to be precise—that the founder had entrusted to me along with his final Art. The weapon was one of the few things the founder had left me with when his role within the Jewel was over and he’d faded away.

The weapon’s formation appeared to have something to do with the rarium ornamentation that had been added around the Jewel. I didn’t know what kind of metal the rarium was or how it had been processed, but from what I’d seen, it had the ability to transform the Jewel into a weapon.

“Knowing whether or not Lyle can use that weapon is definitely important,” the third head conceded. “Lyle’s saber can’t deal with foes with hard armor, but the greatsword could solve that problem, somewhat.”

Maybe I should just choose a different weapon, I thought, glancing at the saber hanging from my hip, *but I just can’t find the resolve to do so. And anyway, don’t they say that it’s best to use the weapon you’re most accustomed to?*

When it came to the hard-armor problem, I wasn’t too concerned—as far as I saw it, I could use magic to deal with any foes who proved difficult to pierce with my blade.

And now that I’ve gone through a period of Growth, I won’t collapse in the middle of battle due to mana depletion anymore. At least...I hope I won’t...

“It would be better to try the greatsword out on one of your days off, rather than one where you’re on the job,” the fourth head declared. “How about you do it today, and invite Novem to go with you?”

“Why can’t I just try it out on my way back from work one day?” I asked. “And why Novem specifically?”

Confusion swirled through me. *I mean, why wouldn’t I bring Aria and Sophia with me as well? Zelphy might be able to offer me some advice too...*

The fourth head sighed. “Think about it a bit, Lyle. You and Novem can have a little outing, just the two of you—think of it as a picnic.”

So, this is all a ploy to send me on a date, huh? I thought, narrowing my eyes. *Do we seriously have to do this now?*

“Just do it,” the fifth head said. “You two are always working together, but an outing like this is different. You’ve even got nice weather today, so go on and invite her!”

With the force of the ancestors’ demands pressing down upon me, I had no choice but to decide that I would invite Novem to go out with me the second I got back to the inn.

Once I’d stored my groceries at the inn, I invited Novem to go out with me for a walk outside of town. We bought food and drink, then headed out to a scenic spot near the city wall, where we sat down in a shady spot beneath a tree.

I glanced over at Novem from where I sat. We’d both dressed casually for our outing, but I couldn’t help but notice that Novem’s clothes were a bit more fashionable than her normal attire. Something about her outfit felt so new and refreshing to me.

“I was honestly quite surprised at your invitation, Lord Lyle,” she told me in a cheerful tone. “I never once thought that you’d ask me out.”

My heart ached at how happy she looked. *There’s no way I can tell her that the only reason I asked her out was because my ancestors told me to...*

“R-Really?” I asked, chuckling and trying to play it off. “Well, the weather was nice, and it’s not like we had any other plans.”

It was too much for my ancestors to handle—their teasing voices erupted from within the Jewel.

“Novem looks like she’s having quite a lot of fun,” the second head commented slyly. “You don’t think, perhaps, that she was waiting for you to do something like this...?”

The third head gave a disapproving rumble. “Lyle, don’t tell me you’re the

type who thinks you don't need to give bait to a fish you've already got on the line."

"Go get stabbed, you enemy of all women," the fourth head snarled.

"You shouldn't take that sort of attitude toward women, Lyle," the fifth head chided.

"Maybe you should take some time to work on that yourself, dad," the sixth head shot back.

"Come to think of it, Lyle," the seventh head broke in, "you've been so attentive to Aria and Sophia lately that you've practically left Novem by the wayside."

I felt guilty all of a sudden. *It's not like I'm consciously neglecting her or anything*, I thought. *We're together every day from sunrise to sunset! I didn't realize I was making her feel that way...*

"Hey, Novem..." I asked hesitantly. "Come to think of it, how have things been lately? With Aria and Sophia, I mean. The party's been pretty awkward ever since all the stuff that happened during my Growth..."

I hadn't even been able to have a proper conversation with the other two girls until a short while ago. Aria had seemed particularly angry at me—she'd refused to listen to most of what I had to say. It had been exhausting, working together in that environment. I'd felt like I was suffocating.

It was only recently that things had gone back to how they used to be, but from time to time I'd still get this feeling of distance, like there was a wall up between the girls and me.

Novem paused, looking at me with a rather troubled face.

It's that bad?!

"Well, umm..." she said, wincing, "even I can't stick up for you when it comes to what you said to Aria back on that hill. Truthfully, I believe her anger was justified."

"I can't stick up for him either," the third head said tiredly. "I mean, she responded with 'I can die happy,' to his 'The moon is beautiful, isn't it?' and he

took it *literally*.”

I listened to their responses with a heart full of confusion. I still didn’t understand what was so bad about what I’d said, and whenever I asked my ancestors, they refused to tell me.

“In any case, milord,” Novem continued, “Aria doesn’t hold any enmity toward you, and neither does Sophia. They are both quite considerate of your well-being, actually.”

“That’s...a good thing, right?” I asked hesitantly. “I mean, it would be really depressing if they hated me or something.”

As long as they don’t hate me, I’m grateful, I thought. I don’t want the people I’ve started to build relationships with here to start disliking me.

Novem gave me a kind smile in response. “As far as the relationship between Aria, Sophia, and I, you can rest assured that we’re all getting along just fine. I haven’t had any issues with the two of them. In fact, we all went out together just the other day, and I thought they seemed a bit more comfortable around each other.”

That’s a relief, I thought. At least they’re close enough that they can go out shopping together.

“Lyle, don’t you take those words at face value,” the fifth head said in a firm, weighty tone.

I decided not to take him too seriously, despite the sincerity in his voice. It was easier to just be happy that the three of them were getting along.

“I see,” I said, giving Novem a relieved smile. “That’s good.”

She nodded. “Yes. So you don’t have to worry about us, milord.”

We talked a bit more after that, chatting about all sorts of things.

Eventually, Novem asked me what I was planning on doing after our instruction period with Zelphy was over. “Would you like the party to stay in Darion for a while longer, or would you like to travel elsewhere? We don’t have *too* much financial leeway, but if we ventured to a new location, I think we could make it as we are now.”

I knew I'd have to make the decision soon—whether I liked it or not. On one hand, Darion was a comfortable place to stay, since it was soft on new adventurers. On the other hand, it was a boring place for those who were more experienced, and at my party's current level, we could likely make a place for ourselves pretty much anywhere we went. Apart from places that required incredibly specialized skill sets, of course.

"I haven't decided yet, but I think we'll leave," I said finally, eyes trained on the sky above us. "That seems to be Lord Bentler's preference as well."

It was likely that Lord Bentler saw me as nothing but trouble, since I was the discarded former heir to House Walt and the earldom that came along with it. I didn't think it was a reach to presume that the lord had no desire to shelter me forever.

"If we do leave," Novem said, "I would like to recommend the Academic City as our next destination."

"By 'Academic City,' do you mean Aramthurst...?" I asked.

The Academic City of Aramthurst was a special territory that fell under the Banseim Kingdom's control. From what I'd heard, the city was known both for having a rather peculiar dungeon, and for the fact that it governed itself, since it had no lord presiding over it. The Academic City also housed a teaching institute called the Academy, which made its title rather fitting.

My personal impression of the city was that it was a place where plenty of scholarly folk lived, and noble children went to study.

"Wait," I said before she could answer. "Are you saying you want us to enroll in school...?"

Novem shook her head. "No, we don't have the money for that. I wouldn't say getting an education would be impossible for us, per se, but enrolling at a school for several years would be quite hard on our wallets."

Why does Novem want us to go to Aramthurst then? I wondered.

She seemed to see my confusion, since she continued, "Aramthurst is famous for its Academy, but people also gather there to visit the city's libraries, private schools, and various training facilities. There are seminars and training halls that

teach adventurers the necessary tools of the trade as well—I thought perhaps we could make use of some of them and tackle the city’s dungeon at the same time.”

“Libraries, huh? I can see the appeal,” the third head said, immediately latching on to the idea.

“It’s pretty rare for a territory to go without a lord,” the seventh head commented. “But Aramthurst’s dungeon is...a little strange. As the story goes, the dungeon was so strange that it brought scholars flocking to study it, and eventually a city grew up around it.”

Once the third head heard this, he was completely sold on the idea. “Come on, Lyle,” he exclaimed, “let’s go to Aramthurst! I’m sure you’ll be able to learn plenty of valuable lessons there. As a matter of fact, a long-term stay might be something to consider!”

That’s right, the third head loves books, I thought. That must be what’s prompting him to agree with Novem.

The second head gave a tired sigh. “Ignoring books and schools and whatnot, you should be choosing a city with stronger monsters than those around Darion.”

The money an adventurer made for defeating a monster typically increased based on the monster’s strength. That meant that the harsher the place we chose, the more money we had to gain.

“The Academic City of Aramthurst, huh...?” I murmured thoughtfully. “I’ll consider it.”

Even if I don’t choose it as our next base of operations, it wouldn’t be a bad place for us to visit, I mused.

But that train of thought was quickly cut short by Novem asking, “Come to think of it, milord, didn’t you have another reason for coming here besides spending time with me?”

My head snapped up. I’d been so relaxed I had nearly forgotten my original objective!

“That’s right,” I told Novem, standing and getting a good grip on the Jewel. “I was planning on trying something out with this.”

Novem gave the Jewel a warm look. “Oh, I see,” she said. “I’ve heard there are some strains of rarium that can change shape. Maybe the ornamentation around your Gem is made of something similar...”

“You think so?” I asked in reply. “From what I’ve heard, this rarium was gifted to House Walt by House Fuchs.”

That’s what the seventh head had told me, at least. He’d said that the Walt Jewel had been decorated with rarium House Fuchs had presented to our house.

A troubled look flickered over Novem’s face. “My apologies. That, I was not aware of.”

I guess it’s understandable she doesn’t know anything about it, I thought. It was done a really long time ago.

“I think this’ll work, but...” There was no telling what would happen when I tried to use the greatsword within the Jewel, so I quickly decided that standing at a safe distance was the best course of action. I stepped out of the shade and put some space between me and Novem.

Once I was in place, I clenched my right hand tightly around the Jewel, picturing the greatsword in my head. I imagined that massive horse-beheading blade all the way down to its finest details, and soon I could feel the silver rarium around the Jewel heating in my hand.

The chain from which the Jewel hung unfastened itself from around my neck, wrapping around my arm instead; I could feel it gradually growing heavier. I held my hand out in front of me, watching as the rarium wriggled around and began to take on a new shape. I gazed with astonishment at the sword that formed before me—it was a completely different size and weight than the rarium ornamentation around the Jewel had been.

“This is...quite something...” one of my ancestors mused.

Moments later, the rarium’s transformation wound to a close. I was left holding a greatsword in my hand—one that was so long it was taller than I was,

and which had the Jewel embedded within it. The blade reminded me of the one I'd seen the founder use when he'd fought the land dragon, and it was the spitting image of the weapon I'd seen floating above his chair in the round-table room.

There was no way I could lift such a heavy blade with one hand, so I had to reach out and grasp the hilt with a second hand before I could hoist it aloft. I ran my eyes over the weapon, taking in how it glistened in the sunlight.

"This is amazing!" I cried. "If I can just get used to wielding—" I broke off; something was wrong. "Wait, hold on!"

The sword started vibrating in my hand, despite the firm grip I had on it. It grew even heavier, like it was trying to buck off my grip. It must have been fueling the process with my mana—I could feel it being slurped away.

"What the hell?!" the second head cried, panicked.

The third head was calmer; he immediately started issuing orders. "Lyle, dispel that thing *at once*. Something's—"

My ancestors' voices cut out—the sword had sucked up all the mana it could, rendering them unable to speak. I couldn't hold onto the weapon much longer; the combination of the sword's incredible weight and its relentless vibrations were too much for me.

I tried gently lowering the sword's tip to the ground, but the mana-gobbling weapon ignored my intentions entirely, slamming into the earth with gusto. It gouged into the soil beneath its blade, sending particles of dirt flying into the air.

A tremendous racket filled my ears—from where I was standing, it felt like a great tremor ripped through the ground. I blinked down at myself, taking in the dirt and the mud that covered my body. But mud was the least of my worries.

Distantly, I thought I could hear Novem calling my name. "Lord Lyle!"

The sword abruptly reverted back into its Jewel form, and seconds later I collapsed onto the torn-up earth. For once, my head was silent—I couldn't hear a single peep from my ancestors.

I stared at where the sword had been only seconds earlier as I lay there on the ground, barely conscious. The Jewel's chain was still wrapped around my arm, and I could feel the shape of the Jewel itself clutched inside my curled fist.

You know, it's been quite a while since I last collapsed from mana depletion, I thought.

"That weapon...it snatched up as much of my mana as it could get its hands on..." I mumbled.

It was like the greatsword had a will of its own. Even worse, it hadn't seemed to be interested in listening to me, even just for a moment.

It's powerful, all right, I thought. *But it's gonna be a hell of a challenge to handle.*

By the time I came to, it was evening. I'd been moved so I was lying in the shade, and my head was resting in Novem's lap.

"Are you all right, milord?" she asked softly, stroking her fingers across my forehead. She looked deeply concerned.

I took stock of how I was feeling—my body was weighed down with an incredible sense of fatigue, and I was drenched in sweat. I didn't think I was bad enough off that I couldn't stand on my own two feet, however.

"How long was I out...?" I mumbled.

Judging by the skies above us, which were tinted slightly orange, I'd been unconscious for quite a while.

"Around three hours, I believe," Novem replied, sending me a relieved smile.

I was unconscious for three whole hours?! I thought, horrified. And Novem looked after me the whole time?! I could hardly contain the guilty feeling welling up in my chest.

"I'm so sorry, Novem," I apologized. "I invited you out to have a good time, but all I did was cause you trouble."

Novem shook her head, waving off my guilty words. Her lustrous tawny hair

glinted under the orange light of the afternoon, making it look suddenly foreign. “Don’t feel guilty, milord,” she told me firmly. “I had my share of fun. But...perhaps you shouldn’t use that weapon too often. As far as I could tell, it was trying to go on a rampage.”

What a troublesome weapon, I thought idly. *That greatsword fit perfectly in my hands, and it had such a destructive might to it. But if I use it, it’ll go wild and suck all my mana away...*

I closed my eyes, and a vision of the founder popped up in the darkness of my mind. An image of my new, problematic blade overlapped with him, as if they were one and the same.

I smiled slightly. “I think the blade’ll be easier to handle once I get on its good side... I’ll have to practice with it for a bit.”

None of my ancestors’ voices chimed in to give me their opinion on the matter.

Hmm, I thought. *I must still be out of mana.*

“But, milord,” Novem said, sounding worried, “I don’t want you to push yourself too hard.”

I slowly sat up. “Thank you for your concern,” I told her. “But I can’t stay like this forever.”

And I thought I’d gained a convenient weapon, I lamented internally. *At least I know, now, that that silver greatsword comes with its fair share of problems. And that if I ever use it in the field, I’ll collapse nearly the second I pull it out.*

Somehow or another, I managed to haul myself to my feet. I drew in a deep breath, eyes trained on the spot the sword had torn into the ground. The force of a single blow had formed a crater several yards across.

“I’ll have to go even farther out for my next test run,” I muttered, scratching at my head.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Novem asked, standing up as well. She moved to my side, supporting me on my still wobbling legs. “You’re sure you don’t need to rest anymore?”

I shook my head. “I’m fine for the moment. I’ll make sure to take it easy once we get back to the inn. Looks like I’ll be needing a bath too.”

I was completely filthy. I looked down at my clothes in horrified fascination—whenever I patted myself, a layer of sand would go careening back to the earth.

I should have known better, I thought, sighing and leaning into Novem’s supportive hold. *My life’s never that easy.*

Zelphy downed the last few drops of ale in her cup before smashing it into the surface of her table. She was in a pub that was frequented by Darion’s adventuring crowd, and she couldn’t escape the relentless buzzing of young adventurers running their mouths about the newly formed dungeon.

Zelphy gazed bitterly at the youngsters, who were too busy rejoicing over gaining a chance to earn a quick fortune to notice.

“How carefree,” she drawled to no one in particular. “And here I am, getting a splitting headache over our unplanned participation.”

No one tried to approach her—her discontentment was clear for all to see. Or perhaps, for *most* to see, since there was a single middle-aged adventurer who had clearly failed to read Zelphy’s mood.

“Ah, come on, what’s it matter?” the adventurer asked, chuckling. “That’s what it’s like to be young. If you try to be clever about everything, all you’ll do is place limits on yourself—you’ll never grow that way.”

This preacher of recklessness was none other than Darrel, Zelphy’s old acquaintance. He walked up to Zelphy’s side, taking a swig of his drink as he settled in next to her.

“Or...” he said slowly, “is there some other problem with that kid? He looked pretty capable to me.”

Well, that’s good news at least, Zelphy thought. *Seems Darrel assessed Lyle as a decently competent adventurer.*

It was something of a compliment to her, after all, to have someone she’d trained be recognized in such a way.

But Zelphy didn't give an inch—she just shrugged. “I just think he's got an unreliable side to him. Sure, he manages when push comes to shove, and I'm sure he's got some sort of plan. But I still think it's too early for his party to be challenging a dungeon.”

Zelphy had not told Lyle he couldn't participate in the dungeon subjugation out of any sense of malice. To be honest, the issue was more one of practicality—there was little information to be found on newly formed dungeons, and this made them incredibly dangerous. On top of that, dungeon subjugation was an entirely different beast than the monster hunts they'd been going on so far. Lyle's party would have to coordinate with the other parties in the dungeon, which they had zero experience in doing.

Darrel laughed, his mouth gaping wide with mirth. “And to think, *this* is the girl who used to do nothing but crazy things. Oh, how time flies.”

Even back when Zelphy had been starting out, Darrel had already been known as a veteran adventurer. He was incredibly skilled, so everyone had expected him to drift to somewhere else, where his abilities could be put to better use. But Darrel had never left Darion.

“Listen to you, reminiscing like that,” Zelphy teased. “You really are getting old.”

Darrel swallowed another mouthful of ale, then let out a hearty laugh. “Of course I'm getting old! My son already went off and got himself a family of his own. I'm a grandpa, for crying out loud.”

He's got a grandkid at forty? Zelphy thought, unsure how to respond. *I've only just gotten married, myself...*

“So, grandpa, how much longer do you plan on staying in the business?” Zelphy asked, changing the subject. “Your body's gotta be giving out on you by now.”

“Well, my earnings were starting to dry up, it's true,” Darrel told her. He turned to face Zelphy, drawing closer so his voice wouldn't be drowned out beneath the lively noise of the pub's crowd of rowdy young adventurers. “I brought up retiring to the Guild a while back, but then they asked me if I wanted to be an instructor instead. I've led a few teams of young'uns since

then, but even that's starting to get harder for me. So...this one I've got now? It'll be my last. Once this dungeon subjugation is over, and they graduate from their instruction period, I'm retiring."

Zelphy ordered another drink, then turned back to Darrel and asked, "What're you gonna do once you retire? You plan on taking it easy in your old age?"

"That's the plan," he replied, nodding. "I'm thinking I'll become a soldier. The lord sent a request for me to work for him through the Guild. I'll spend the rest of my days on standby at some guard station or another."

Ah, Zelphy thought. So Lord Bentler plans on hiring him personally. I'm not surprised—adventurers as experienced as Darrel are a rare find, and he's got a good reputation to boot.

"I see," Zelphy said, nodding. "That's nice to know." She found she felt a bit relieved. She hadn't wanted to see Darrel become one of the many retired adventurers who struggled to make ends meet.

She turned to call for a toast, but Darrel cut her short. "By the way, Zelphy..." he said in a teasing tone, "who do you think will come out on top—my young'uns, or yours?"

Zelphy paused, reflecting for only a moment before shooting back, "Mine. They're inexperienced, but they've got the talent to compensate for it. Their party has two magic users, one who's a specialized magician, and the other who's a swordsman. The other two have Arts. Every single one of them is outstanding."

Not too long ago, those kids were getting teary-eyed over drain cleaning and monster dismantlement, Zelphy reminisced with a grin. But lately...they're beginning to look like real adventurers.

Darrel shot her a cheeky grin.

"What's that look for?" Zelphy protested, narrowing her eyes at him.

He held up his hands. "I couldn't rightly say if my young'uns have talent or not, but... Well, they're pretty good at what they do. But maybe I'm only saying that since I'm the one who trained them." Darrel's lips spread into a smirk.

"Whaddaya say, Zelphy? How about we put our money where our mouth is?"

Let's make a bet on whose kids'll get the better dungeon results."

Zelphy's face screwed up into a frown. *Damn it*, she thought. *I've never won a bet with this guy before.*

It only took a moment of recollection for her to realize that Darrel had only ever made bets with her that he'd felt confident he would win.

But...it might be good for Lyle's party to have some stiff competition, Zelphy mused. *And even if I lose the bet, I can think of it as treating the old man to a bit of a retirement celebration.*

Zelphy's eyes flicked up, locking with Darrel's. "You're on, old man." She held out a hand. "Why don't we shake on it?"

And so, in the corner of a rowdy pub, a competition was born...

Chapter 33: Let the Hunt Begin

“Hup!”

The sun blazed over Rondo, Ralph, and I as we pushed a wagon forward from behind, trying to free a stuck wheel. The air around us lay stagnant with heat, the stench of horse and manure rising in a suffocating cloud.

Nearby, a great number of carts and wagons moved in rank and file, transporting people and other goods.

We’d been able to travel most of the way to the dungeon on the highways leading out from Darion, but now we’d been forced to leave them behind to make our way over a stretch of plains. The area was hard to navigate, covered in tall grasses that grew waist high. It was tough going, but that was no surprise—dungeons didn’t take human convenience into consideration when they formed, after all.

“Looks like the wheel’s tangled up in the weeds,” Rondo said, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

He examined the wheel for a moment, making sure it wasn’t broken, then cut the vegetation loose with his dagger.

I settled in to keep watch as Rondo worked, scanning my gaze over our surroundings. It only took a fraction of a second to see that plenty of other wagons were in similar predicaments to ours.

I’d only been at my post for a moment when Sophia came over and offered me a drink.

“Here you go,” she said, placing the cup in my hand.

“Thanks,” I replied, watching her as she went over to Ralph and Rondo and offered them cups as well.

I downed the cup’s contents in one gulp—it did make me feel better, though not by much.

“Couldn’t they have cleared the grass beforehand?” the second head complained from his place within the Jewel. “There are plenty of different methods they could have used to get it done.”

“Perhaps they thought a path would form naturally after our caravan stomped on it enough,” the fourth head refuted. “It’s certainly not the most efficient way of doing things, though.”

I could have used my Arts to find us a path that was more easily accessible for the wagon, but we were flanked by other travelers—it was impossible for us to escape the herd. It wasn’t like we could abandon the wagon we’d rented either; it was loaded high with a wide variety of supplies. We couldn’t afford to leave behind all the clothing, food, water, tools, and spare weapons we’d brought with us.

“What were they thinking when they made our traveling schedule?” demanded the fifth head. His voice was rough with irritation, and had been for a while. “This is a mess! What the hell was the advance party doing? Shouldn’t they have been at least a little considerate of all the people who have to follow after them?”

From what I’d heard, the Guild had sent out another adventuring party to scout out the path we were currently taking. But, true or not, our group wasn’t getting anywhere.

I glanced up and waved a hand at Zelphy in greeting when I saw that she’d returned from the front of our traveling party. She’d gone and met with the rest of our caravan to talk over how things were going.

“Take a short break,” she said with a sigh. “We’re stuck for the moment. A few of the wagons up front got ruined when some slimes attacked their horses. The animals started thrashing around and did all kinds of damage.” She ran a hand over her forehead. “Ugh, this is the worst.”

According to our itinerary, we were supposed to arrive at the dungeon by noon today. And yet...it was already noon.

“Why don’t we send someone ahead to find us an easier route?” I suggested.

Zelphy seemed on board with the idea, but my hopes were dashed when she

informed me, “We did that already, and look where it’s got us. This is precisely why they shouldn’t use amateurs to do such an important job. Good grief.”

“What about the people who reached the dungeon before us?” Ralph asked from his perch on a nearby rock. “Shouldn’t they be helping us?”

Zelphy accepted some water from Sophia before she replied. She downed the liquid and ran a hand over her mouth, then said, “That group was an adventurer party from Central, not Darion. Their job is purely to investigate the dungeon—they’ve got top-notch surveying tools and everything. If we asked them to do odd jobs for us, they’d just refuse.”

Ah, I thought. So Central sent a specialized party, and the Darion Adventurers’ Guild is in no position to order them around. And apparently clearing paths is beneath them. I rolled my eyes.

“Hmph,” the seventh head scoffed. “I always knew adventurers were useless.”

“The seventh head may be a bit biased, but this time I have to agree with him,” the third head said. “Even if they did sincerely think we’d run the grass down and be able to eventually make a path, those adventurers should have tried it out themselves first.”

The fourth head chuckled. “When you look at things strictly on paper, even indispensable fields can look redundant,” he said lightly. “This just goes to show that the best-looking result is not always the optimal one.”

The best-looking result isn’t always the most optimal...? I mused. I had to tilt my head at that one. I didn’t dwell on the thought long, though, since something else was bothering me more. *When are we going to be able to get those immobilized wagons up and running again?*

“Huh?” came a voice from behind me.

I turned around, my gaze immediately catching on the large, splendid carriage that had been following behind our wagon. People were starting to spill out of it, but not just any people—they were all women.

Rondo stared on in shock, as did Ralph and I.

The women pouring from the carriage began to roll and stretch their shoulders, making it very apparent that they weren't clothed in adventurer attire. Each of the women wore a flashy dress; some of the dresses dipped low over their chests, while others had high slits up the sides, revealing tantalizing glimpses of their thighs.

To all of our surprise, the last one out of the carriage was a man. He was slender and elderly, and wore a cap over the top of his head.

"I beg your pardon, good sirs," he said to us with a friendly expression. "The girls were getting a bit bored, so I thought I'd let them venture out a moment for a change of pace. Would you happen to know how long we're going to be stuck here?"

"Huh?! I mean, uh, yeah," I hurriedly replied. "It should be a decent amount of time before we start moving again. A few of the wagons up front got ruined."

The old man took off his cap, holding a hand to his forehead in distress. "Well, that certainly sounds like trouble... But forgive me, I never introduced myself, did I? I am Byron, the sutler for this expedition. Please feel free to send for me if you need anything. I've got everything from food to weapons, to wine and...*more*."

Byron jerked a thumb toward his carriage—or, more likely, the courtesans milling around outside of it.

"Well, well..." the sixth head said, chuckling. "Now this is—"

The fifth head cut him off with a sigh. "Lyle, you should be careful with this man. His wares will be much more expensive than they would be if they were sold by *anyone* else. I'm not talking about just a small percentage either. You should expect his prices to be double or more than the going rate."

Isn't that a total rip-off? I wondered.

That's when Zelphy noticed who we were talking to.

"Byron, you damn old fart!" she snarled.

The level of venom in her voice shocked me, but Byron just laughed it off.

"Well, well, if it isn't Zelphy," he said with a kind smile. "If you're here, that

means these are the young'uns you trained up?"

Zelphy stormed over to us in a huff, a stiff smile taking over her face as her gaze flitted between the old man and the courtesans lounging around his carriage.

"Ah, I see," she snarked. "You're using this little holdup to tout your wares, huh? This whole setup screams of merchant tactics."

The old man shrugged slightly. "It's a daily struggle for merchants like me, dear Zelphy. And anyways, it's important for young boys like these to have a chance to release their pent-up stress."

The sixth head couldn't agree with the man more. "Precisely!" he cheered. "It's vital!"

The fifth head let out a *tsk* of disgust.

"How irritating," the seventh head muttered.

Did the sixth head...have women troubles or something? I wondered. *Out of my ancestors, he certainly seems like the one most liable to play around.*

I decided to ask him about it when I had the chance.

Zelphy called Novem and the rest of our party over to where we were standing, pointing to them before shoosing Byron away.

"Take a good look, you old geezer," Zelphy snarled. "We've got plenty of girls already."

"Oh, my apologies," Byron said, his gaze dancing over Novem, Aria, Sophia, and Rachel. "But I have other wares too, you know. All of you, please feel free to stop by if you're interested in taking a look."

He raised a hand in farewell, then headed off to another deadlocked wagon. The courtesans followed behind him in a wave.

Oh, I thought, taken a bit off guard. He really was just trying to advertise.

"That was...surprising," I commented.

"Yeah, it seriously was," Rondo and Ralph agreed.

Rachel didn't look convinced in the slightest. "Surprising or not, you two both

looked pretty interested,” she commented.

The two boys opened their mouths to start formulating their excuses, but Zelfy waved them into silence.

“Listen up,” she cautioned us. “You should think long and hard before you go to a sutler for supplies. Price hikes are a standard practice for them. In some cases, you could be charged two to three times the market value of a product. If you’re not careful, they’ll drain you dry of all your savings.”

My ancestors had told me something similar, so I knew she was telling the truth. Despite that, we’d still have to go to Byron if we wanted anything while we were at the dungeon—there was no other place to go.

Sophia seemed like she was feeling a bit lost, since she turned to Aria and mumbled, “U-Umm, those women from before, were they...?”

“Yep, they were prostitutes,” Aria replied matter-of-factly. “I’m surprised they have the nerve to do business all the way out here, honestly.”

It seemed the contents of the rest of the conversation finally hit Sophia then, since she turned red from ear to ear, her mouth gaping open in horror. “L-Lyle...” she finally managed. “You don’t, by chance, use their...*services*, do you?!”

The third head boomed a laugh. “Unfortunately, this kid doesn’t have the guts!” he roared in response.

Too bad she can’t hear you, I thought, feeling a bit annoyed. *And I mean, of course I’ve never used a prostitute before, but why does he have to put it like that...?*

“It’s okay, Sophia,” I comforted her. “I’ve never used one before.”

A look of abject relief came over her face.

Novem let out a troubled laugh, then looked around and said, “Well, it looks like we’ll be heading out again shortly. We should prepare to get moving.”

No sooner had she said those words than the group ahead of ours started rolling slowly forward. We quickly wrapped up our break time, and followed close behind.

When we had finally reached our destination, it was evening.

Once we'd arrived, we'd quickly started settling in and setting up our camp. We erected our tents, and double-checked all of our supplies as we unloaded them.

Soon, it was time for dinner. Our food was provided by a Guild chef, just as it had been during our journey so far. We could expect this to remain the case for the entirety of our time here subjugating the dungeon, but there was one problem—to be blunt, the contents of the Guild-provided meals were absolutely abysmal.

Tonight, we were given vegetable and bean soup with hard bread.

I mean, I know we shouldn't be greedy, but this is terrible, I whined internally. *They didn't even give me enough to eat!*

"It's a bit of a meager portion," I complained to Zelphy.

She sent me a glare. "That's why I told you to buy food supplies," she snapped. "This is all you get in a place like this. And don't you dare hold a grudge against any of the chefs—they'd prefer to be serving you something better too. It's just that, in this environment, they don't have any decent ingredients."

I glanced around, idly taking in the truth of this statement. All I saw were weeds and rocks, with a small forest outlined in the distance. There was no village nearby, and the closest clean water source was quite far from where we'd set up camp.

Rondo's shoulders drooped. "I heard the nearest river is like three miles away from here. Even just drawing water is gonna be a challenge."

"If there was water nearby and the place was hospitable, the lord would arrange to set up a new settlement here once we'd subjugated the dungeon," Zelphy explained indifferently. "But since this place is so uninhabitable, we'll be leaving the moment the dungeon is cleared."

"You could venture into the forest and look for a waterhole," the second head

added, “but you’d probably have to venture pretty far, and you’d have to check if it was even usable if you did find one. That plan’s probably more trouble than it’s worth, to be honest.”

I shrugged, not really interested in the conversation. Fetching water wasn’t part of our job description. Odd jobs like finding and hauling water were for the adventurers who’d been hired to support our expedition. Adventurers like us, who were challenging the dungeon, didn’t have to worry about stuff like that.

“Now then,” Zelphy said, voice turning somber, “let me explain how tomorrow will go. We’ll receive a report from the survey team in the morning before we get to the actual dungeon-clearing portion of the day. After that—”

Wait... I thought as I listened to the schedule she laid out. But wouldn’t all that just unnecessarily agitate the dungeon...?

The next day, the dungeon subjugation finally began. My party and I greeted the first day of our expedition with eagerness, spending our morning going over what we knew of the dungeon and using the details we’d gathered to decide which role each of our party members should take on the day’s excursion.

Now, we stood outside the dungeon, our weapons at the ready. Nearly forty adventurers stood around us, their eyes on the dungeon’s entrance. Like us, the adventurers had flocked here for one reason and one reason alone: to fight some monsters.

I stared at the opening of the dungeon before me, which was made up of trees that had twisted into the shape of an arch—the resulting gateway was so unnatural-looking it almost seemed to be man-made.

It shouldn’t be much longer before they start to emerge, I thought.

We’d already set some traps up around the area, and made a ton of noise to draw the monsters in our direction.

“Here they come!” yelled an adventurer whose name I didn’t know.

Novem raised her staff, preparing to cast a spell, and Rachel quickly followed suit. The rest of us waited with our weapons drawn.

Five adventurers raced from the dungeon’s entrance, quickly followed by an

outpouring of goblins, orcs, and insect monsters.

Everyone burst into action, the archers loosing their arrows and the magicians invoking their spells. The monsters rushing from the dungeon were blown to smithereens.

Our tensed shoulders relaxed once we got a good look at the area in front of us—not a single monster remained. An adventurer in a robe of fine fabric stepped forward to manage the aftermath; the many gemstones woven into his robe glittered as he gestured about and issued various orders.

“Another wave down...” I muttered to myself.

This wasn’t our first time completing this process—we’d been repeating the cycle over and over again since we’d arrived at the dungeon earlier this morning. We’d defeated countless monsters at this point.

From what Zelphy had told me the day before, this was a dungeon-management method which would allow us to whittle down the number of monsters inside of the dungeon without overstimulating it. It seemed like a pretty reliable technique, but I couldn’t help but wonder if there was a better way to go about it.

“Doesn’t look like this method has changed much,” the fifth head muttered from within the Jewel.

Any reply I might have made was stymied by the adventurer who walked up to our party and immediately began briefing us on the dungeon’s condition.

“That’s a wrap,” he told us. “The number of monsters in the dungeon has been depleted to an acceptable level. The actual dungeon exploration will begin tomorrow.”

We all nodded, which he took as a signal to launch into our instructions for the rest of the day. “Unless otherwise designated, all parties will focus on securing the safety of our camp by hunting down the monsters in the surrounding area,” he informed us.

So clearing the area around the camp is apparently part of our job, I mused. For our first day here, at least.

I'd noticed that some adventurers had been stationed as lookouts around the various campsites, but apparently they weren't supposed to take care of any of the monsters they saw. They'd been instructed not to leave their posts, and that their job was purely to serve as eyes for the rest of the campsite.

"This isn't exactly...how I imagined a dungeon subjugation would go," I commented once the adventurer had left.

Rondo gave me a bitter smile. "Well, if nothing else, this method's efficient. But unfortunately for us, all the materials and Demonic Stones the monsters dropped will go straight into the hands of the Guild."

I cast my gaze over all the monsters laying around the dungeon's entrance—there were hundreds of them, and each and every one of them apparently fell under the Guild's jurisdiction.

Granted, there's no way we could figure out who defeated what, I thought. It would be pretty dumb for anyone to start an argument over it. Honestly, maybe it's for the best that the Guild's claimed everything.

"All right," Zelphy said, cutting into my thoughts. "Off to our stations we go. Lyle, why don't you find some monsters for us?"

I activated my Arts as Zelphy'd instructed, idly watching as she sheathed her sword and slung her shield over her back. A faint heat began to emanate from the Jewel as I used Map and Search. Map was the fifth head's Art, which allowed me to produce a map of the surrounding area in my head, and Search was the sixth head's Art, which populated said map with moving indicators marking any allies, enemies, or neutral parties in my immediate proximity. Allies were marked with blue indicators, and enemies with red. Neutral parties were marked in yellow.

"There's some monsters that way," I said, pointing in the correct direction. "Looks like...sixteen in total."

We quickly decided that Aria and Sophia would remain at our tent in order to watch over our party's belongings. That meant that our hunting party consisted of myself, Novem, Zelphy, Rondo, and his other two party members.

"That's a convenient Art you've got there, Lyle," Ralph said, eyes lingering on

me. “What’s it do, exactly?”

Rachel reached out an arm and tapped her staff against his shoulder. “Don’t go asking about other people’s Arts, Ralph. You know better—it’s bad manners.”

“Fine, I get it,” Ralph said, turning to me and apologizing.

I waved him off, insisting that he hadn’t bothered me in the slightest.

We got on our way soon after that, heading toward the enemies I’d spotted. As we wandered toward our destination, we caught sight of the party Darrel was accompanying. Their leader appeared to be a male adventurer with a head of slightly curly purple hair. He wore leather armor and carried a metal shield, which was decorated with an insignia of a sword with wings.

Maybe his combat style is similar to Zelphy’s, I thought, eyeing the sword and shield he was carrying.

Darrel glanced over, catching sight of us too. “Good luck out there!” he called, waving his hand.

I waved back, but the adventurers at Darrel’s side only glared in return.

“What’s with them...?” Ralph wondered.

Zelphy winced. “Oops, guess I forgot to tell you. Darrel and I have a bet going. We wagered over whose party was going to earn the most money while they helped subjugate the dungeon. So, basically, you guys are competing against the party Darrel trained. Good luck and all that.”

“That’s...kinda out of nowhere...” I said blankly. I didn’t know what else to say; the whole thing seemed so sudden.

The sixth head paid no mind to my confusion—he just started cackling from his place inside the Jewel. “Well, ain’t that just peachy?” he drawled. “No harm in a bit of competition—it’ll spice things up.” He laughed a bit longer, then finally got serious again. “That aside,” he said, “the actual exploration starts tomorrow, eh?”

“So it seems,” said the fifth head, as nonchalant as ever. “I’ll be sitting back and just watching for a bit, Lyle. It wouldn’t be any fun if I came right out and

told you how everything should be done. And anyways, adventurers probably have their own ways of handling dungeons.”

“You’re right,” the second head agreed. “We’ve got to give him some time to get used to the dungeon before we butt in.” He cleared his throat. “You’d better be ready, Lyle—you’ll be starting off on your own.”

But what am I supposed to be watching out for...? I wondered, my mind filling with questions.

I opened my mouth, intent on getting an explanation, but was forced into silence when I came face-to-face with a gaggle of goblins. My party fell into combat formation around me, and soon I was too focused on fighting to worry over my unanswered questions.

“So, those were the guys, right?” asked Rex, who was the leader of the party of adventurers Darrel was training.

Rex’s party called themselves the SwordWings and had a crest fashioned after the name, though Rex was the only one of them who actually wielded a sword. With nine members—ten, including Darrel—they were considered a large party among the Darion crowd, though they hadn’t started out that way. They’d kept at adventuring diligently for years before they were able to grow to their current size.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Darrel replied, chuckling. “By my estimation, they’re pretty good. You lot should do your best.”

“You lot” consisted of one magician, two scouts, one supporting party member, and five frontline fighters—one being Rex, who served as the party’s vanguard swordsman.

Hiring Darrel had been a group decision; his training would help prepare them to leave Darion behind. The dungeon subjugation wasn’t much different—the SwordWings saw it as a convenient way to secure funds for their future endeavors.

Despite that, the SwordWings weren’t feeling very enthused. They were thankful to take part, of course, but now they had a foe they had to keep an eye

on.

Rex had heard that Darrel had some sort of bet going, but he'd never even dreamed that his party would be competing with the one led by *Womanizer Lyle*.

No matter how Rex looked at it, Lyle seemed to be in quite the envious position. Truthfully, any adventurer like Rex, who'd had to diligently work their way up, would think the same.

Lyle had barely even become an adventurer before he'd hired himself a veteran instructor to show him the ropes, and before anyone even knew what was happening, he'd managed to take out a brigade of bandits and received a request for help directly from Darion's lord. At this point, the kid was famous.

Rex couldn't help but find the whole thing rather unfair.

"Do you think we'll lose to them?" he asked Darrel bitterly.

Darrel just laughed. "There are no absolutes in this world," he told Rex. "*That's* what I think. A bet wouldn't be a bet if we were already sure we could win. Zelphy's the one training them, remember. You might lose if you're not careful."

Rex gritted his teeth. *I could lose to someone like that...?*

Rex and the SwordWings had all heard the rumors about Lyle's party that were so popular back in Darion. Just hearing of how Lyle had surrounded himself with a party full of beautiful girls was enough to irritate the all-male team.

"There's no way in hell I'm going to lose to that guy," Rex said, his voice thick with resolve.

Darrel patted him on the shoulder. "Now that's the spirit! Don't worry, just do what you always do. Have some confidence."

The members of the SwordWings glared at Lyle's party as they faded into the distance.

Lyle may have shrugged off their competition, but the SwordWings were not about to do the same. The heat of rivalry burned through them like a raging

fire.

“It’s cramped in here,” I muttered.

The morning of our second day at the dungeon had arrived, and I was currently spending it standing in the small-but-busy tent that Guild personnel were using to conduct their business. The tent contained a reception desk run by several Guild staff, a bulletin board pinned with copies of the Guild cards of the adventurers taking part in the expedition, and a simple work table upon which a map of the dungeon was spread.

My eyes settled onto the table with the dungeon map; adventurers representing various parties were clustered around it, waiting their turn to declare which part of the dungeon they wanted to explore. If too many adventurers decided on a single area, the Guild staff would attempt to scatter them, recommending other spots for them to investigate.

From what my ancestors had told me, this process was relatively easy when a lord was running a dungeon expedition—the lord would simply issue an order telling a platoon where they were to go, and that would be the end of it. With adventurers, the matter was much more rowdy, often descending into heated debates or even outright quarrels. The Guild staff were forced to spend much of their time mediating between groups and negotiating an outcome that worked for everyone involved.

“There has to be some way to make this more efficient,” the second head said tiredly as he watched the adventurers bicker. “Though perhaps this is the natural way of things, when everyone’s out for their own profit.”

I didn’t reply, continuing to wait for my own turn at the map table. I’d been waiting a while—the tent had been packed since the crack of dawn.

I yawned and looked around the tent again, catching sight of Hawkins talking to the same extravagantly dressed adventurer I’d seen outside the dungeon the day before. The two of them appeared to be going over some documents, checking things off as they went.

That guy must be one of the adventurers that were dispatched from Central, I

thought idly.

“So...” Hawkins said slowly, pointing a finger at two different spots on a map. “The shifts happened here and here, correct?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” the adventurer from Central replied.

Hawkins adjusted the dungeon map so it corresponded to the changes.

“As for the innermost chamber,” the adventurer continued, “I haven’t been able to sense anything so far. Sorry, but you’ll just have to get the adventurers on duty to search for it.”

“Seems cartography’s gotten easier,” the fifth head declared, staring at the map through my eyes. “They can get all that information just from buying the right tools now, instead of having to search for someone with the right scanning Art.”

I still feel like their knowledge falls short of what I can see when I use Map, though, I thought.

Hawkins got up from his seat at the receptionist desk and hurried off to start work on his next task, his place being taken by the familiar face of a certain female receptionist.

Santoire Maillet was the most popular receptionist at the Darion Adventurers’ Guild, though a good part of that popularity could be attributed to the fact that she was the only young woman working among that particular section of Guild staff. Her pretty blonde hair and blue eyes didn’t hurt either.

“Yeah, okay then,” I heard her say in a bored tone. “How about you take this area?”

Anxiety tensed my spine. From what I’d seen, Santoire was careless and lazy—when she worked the desk, she would favor some parties over the others, and would mess up forms without a care in the world. In the past, I’d often wondered why the Guild kept her working the counters at all, but lately, I’d begun to suspect that she was too popular for them to get rid of.

When my turn finally came, I stepped up to where Santoire sat at the Guild desk.

I pointed at the map in front of her, saying, “We’d like to explore—”

“Well, lookee here,” Santoire said, smiling flirtatiously at me. “It’s Lyle Walt. You and I hardly ever get a chance to talk, since you never come to my desk.”

I scratched my head, a bit at a loss now that she’d struck up a conversation with me. Eventually I just settled on apologizing. “I guess you’re right,” I admitted. “Most of the time, I end up working with Mister Hawkins. But, anyways, we’d—”

“You’re so mean, Mister Lyle,” Santoire said lightly, her face screwed up in mock hurt. “If you had ever come to my desk, I would have been *ever* so nice to you.”

I wasn’t too bothered by the rest of her pandering, but after the Growth incident, the third head had started calling me “Mister Lyle” all the time to tease me. As a result, the mere sound of the words filled me with irritation.

“Uh, hey, I’m in a bit of a hurry,” I said abruptly, forcing our conversation to an unnatural close.

The sound of a tongue clicking in disgust came from behind me. I turned around to see several male adventurers glaring in my direction.

When I turned back, Santoire had gotten a little teary-eyed. “You’re despicable,” she said, voice tight. “I just wanted to talk to you a bit!”

A flush worked up my face. “I d-didn’t mean to, umm... B-But anyways, it’ll have to wait until another time!”

I hurriedly finished up my paperwork and fled from the tent. As I made my way out, I could hear Santoire and another adventurer talking behind me.

“Hey, Santoire,” the adventurer said, “you should have dinner with us tonight.”

“I should?” Santoire replied slowly. “I don’t know...”

The adventurer laughed. “Don’t worry, we’re not gonna feed you bean soup. We’re gonna splurge on something nice from Old Byron.”

Santoire’s voice lightened. “Then you can count me in!”

They sound pretty relaxed, I thought. Doesn't seem like either of them is holding a grudge against me, at least.

With this reassuring thought, I hurried off toward the rest of my waiting party.

Now that I'd confirmed which area of the dungeon we should investigate with the Guild, it was time to set out once again. We decided that Novem and Ralph should be the ones that stayed behind today, which left us with a hunting party made up of Aria, Sophia, Zelphy, Rondo, Rachel, and myself.

Getting into the dungeon once we'd arrived was easier than I'd expected—the fact that we'd eliminated all the monsters around the entrance the day before meant that we weren't immediately subject to an attack, and since the Guild had forbid its adventurers from laying any more traps after the first day, we didn't have to worry about watching our step either.

All that was true, but...

"What the hell is going on here?!"

Rondo clapped a hand over his mouth while Rachel tottered on wobbly legs. I wasn't doing much better myself—my head spun in sickening circles as I hobbled forward, hand pressed against my brow.

"Did we fall for a trap or something?" I moaned.

This was met with a laugh from inside the Jewel. As soon as I heard it, I knew it had come from the second head.

"Calm down," he insisted. "This is one of those things you have no choice but to get used to. It's one of the reasons dungeons are such a struggle for beginners to handle."

"The mana inside a dungeon is much denser than the mana outside," the fourth head explained calmly. "By several dozen times, in fact. That's what's making you feel sick. This dungeon's mana density is even more extreme than that—it's a bit much for a group of beginners, if you ask me. You'll get used to it eventually, though, so don't panic. Just make sure you don't push yourself too

hard when you're feeling ill."

I took a few deep breaths, taking in the dungeon's appearance as I did so. It had a dirt floor, which seemed only natural for a dungeon that had formed in a forest. Trees were packed densely together into walls of twisting foliage, the sky overhead blocked out by branches fringed in green leaves. Thankfully, enough light streamed through the greenery above to illuminate our path, making a lantern unnecessary.

"Hold on," Aria said, her unsteady feet stumbling to a halt. She clung to her spear, which she'd been using as a walking stick, and squinted upwards. "It was pretty cloudy today, wasn't it? The sun definitely wasn't shining this brightly when we were outside the dungeon."

"Oh!" Sophia cried. I turned to face her and saw that she had propped a hand on one of the dungeon's woven-tree walls to keep herself upright. "I've heard about this sort of phenomenon before. Dungeons need to devour humans to survive, so they tend to create environments that lure them in. The lighting must be one of the ways it— Blergh!"

Sophia gagged and pressed a hand over her mouth. I went to her side and reached out to rub her back, but found my hand blocked by her holstered battle-axe.

Well, I tried, I thought wryly.

"You guys aren't very lucky," Zelphy said with a grin and a shrug. "The scale might be small on this dungeon, but the density's quite something. It's a bit much for a first-time dungeon crawl."

Judging by that smile, Zelphy's not nearly as affected by the mana density as we are, I thought.

"Umm, we *are* going to get used to this, right?" I asked her.

Zelphy nodded. "Yeah, you'll be fine. Once you spend a few hours in here, you'll adjust, and it won't be so bad after that. Still, I doubt you'll be able to get much of anything done before that happens."

With that said, Zelphy strode forward, and I desperately stumbled after her. The corridor we were in soon opened into a larger room, with no monsters in

sight.

There must have been another party ahead of us, I thought.

Zelphy peered at a part of the wall that looked like it had been pried open, then checked her map. “We’re too late, it looks like. Shoulda known. Not much we could have done to prevent that, though.”

I stared at the damaged portion of the wall, taking in how the branches had grown over one another, almost like they were trying to protect something.

I guess that’s what the treasure chests in this dungeon look like, I thought.

Aria seemed to be thinking along similar lines, since she turned to Zelphy and asked, “Is that a treasure chest?”

I glanced over at her at the same time Zelphy did, both of us taking in how the sickness brought on by the mana density had sapped the color from her face.

“Hold that thought,” Zelphy told her. “Why don’t we all sit down and take a little break.” She waited until we all got settled, then launched straight into our itinerary for the next few days. “First things first: we’re gonna put combat and exploration on the back burner for today and tomorrow. What’s important right now is to get everyone accustomed to the atmosphere of the dungeon. If someone pushes themselves too far and gets themselves injured, it won’t be a laughing matter.”

No one objected to that—they couldn’t. No one even wanted to entertain fighting monsters in our current condition.

We could probably handle goblins or insect monsters, I thought, but anything stronger than that would get ugly.

“With that out of the way,” Zelphy continued, “we can go back to your question, Aria. Dungeons come in all shapes and sizes, as do the treasure chests inside them. You can never be sure what they’ll look like or what characteristics they’ll have. When you’re subjugating a dungeon, your main focus should be gathering information and using it to prepare yourself appropriately. That’s really the only way you should be going about it, since there’s no dungeon-clearing method that works every time.”

The entire time Zelphy had been speaking, her eyes had been fixed on me. It felt like she was trying to chisel her words straight into my head.

Rachel leaned forward, her face pale and wrinkled with discomfort. “With nearly fifty people in the dungeon, is it even possible for us to make any money...?”

Adventurers, I thought, amused. *We’ve always got our eyes on the money.*

“You guys should be able to make plenty of money,” Zelphy reassured her. “This dungeon might be small in scale, but it’s quite vast, and it shifts occasionally. Plus, even though we don’t know what is in those treasure chests, we do know that they replenish themselves regularly. We should be able to get our hands on one or two of them eventually.”

This made a thought occur to me, and I activated Map and Search. A map of the dungeon spread out before me, covered in a shifting array of red and yellow markers.

No traps as far as I can tell, I thought idly. *And the treasure chests...* A grin came over my face. *I can see their locations crystal clear.*

“That’s a fine Art you have,” the fourth head said enviously. “I’d have loved to have it in my time.”

“Those two Arts are incredibly effective,” the seventh head reminisced. “They perform magnificently both on the battlefield and in peacetime.”

Hmm, I thought. *Can I use Map and Search to help us avoid all the monsters and head straight for the chests?*

It was possible, but right now I had a more fundamental problem—I was ill, and my body wasn’t interested in performing such a feat.

“Are you sure we’ll be able to get to some of the chests?” Rondo asked anxiously. “This is a small-scale dungeon, and so many people are working on subjugating it. Doesn’t that mean we only have a few days to accomplish anything before someone conquers it?”

Zelphy put a thoughtful hand to her chin. “This dungeon isn’t that simple,” she said. “It’s not small enough to clear that quickly regardless, but we also still

don't know where the innermost chamber is. Plus, this is *Darion* we're talking about."

This last statement made all five of us give her a look of utmost confusion.

She shot us a self-deprecating smile. "The Darion Adventurers' Guild doesn't have any members who are exceptional enough to clear a dungeon in a few days. We had to bring in a team from Central, remember? That should have been enough to show you how unskilled we are around here."

She's right... I thought slowly. *Since Darion's a city for beginners, everyone with even a little skill has moved on to somewhere else. That means the adventurers here are all going to be pretty low quality, aside from experienced veterans like Zelphy and Darrel.*

"Come to think of it," Rondo said thoughtfully, "How skilled are those adventurers from Central, anyways?"

"You mean how strong are they?" Zelphy asked. "Well, I noticed their leader was armed to the teeth with Demonic Tools, so he's a cut above the average adventurer. Most of them were for investigation purposes, but there's no guaranteeing he doesn't have tools for combat as well." Zelphy's eyes narrowed in thought. "Though if he didn't have his equipment, I think I could handle him..."

"Ah, I see," the seventh head chimed in. "Those Demonic Tools he's using for investigation must reproduce Arts similar to Map and Search. Judging from the maps he's giving the Guild, though, those Arts are nowhere close to as useful as the fifth and sixth heads'. Which means..."

"That they're not much of a threat," the fifth head finished. "At least, not from what we've seen—that guy's Arts appear to have a smaller area of effect than ours, and they seem to provide the user with less information. With that said, I've got a more practical question—just how effective are Demonic Tools these days?"

"In my era," the seventh head answered, "Demonic Tools could only reproduce the first stage of any given Art. I can't remember ever hearing of a second stage being replicated successfully."

“So Demonic Tools are still a bit dicey,” the third head mused. “Why did Gems fall out of favor then? Wouldn’t it be better to have an item that stored several Arts, and could access higher stages?”

This was a question I actually knew the answer to—it was simple, really.

In order to record an Art in a Gem, the owner of the Art had to be carrying the item on their person when they reached their third stage. Demonic Tools skipped over this whole troublesome process; you could record whatever Art you wanted, whenever you wanted.

It’s really only natural Demonic Tools took over, I thought. When compared with Gems, they’re much more convenient, and you’re able to have your pick of Arts.

After our discussion with Zelphy was over, we settled in for a long break. A few hours had passed when Zelphy finally clapped her hands together and gestured for us to climb to our feet.

“It doesn’t feel so bad in here now, don’t you think?” she asked us cheerfully. “Let’s go in a bit farther before we turn around and head out for the day.”

We climbed up off the ground sluggishly, checking over our equipment with tired eyes.

That’s when I felt it—someone was watching me.

I whipped around, then froze when I was met with a rather peculiar sight. A vivid flower was peeking at me through one of the gaps between the trees that formed the dungeon’s walls. Its drooping stalk was adorned with many blooming clusters of small bluish-purple flowers.

“When did that...?” I trailed off, brow furrowing in confusion.

There’s no way I overlooked that flower, right? I feel like I would remember seeing something like that. And it felt like someone was watching me too... But no one was there...

“What’s wrong?” Sophia asked. I looked up from the flower to see her approaching me.

I pointed at the subject of my musings. “It’s this flower—it wasn’t here earlier.”

I reached out to touch it, but before my fingers grazed any of the petals, a small bunch of flowers fell right into my hand.

“Whoa!” I cried, startled.

Sophia leaned forward, inspecting the flower in my hand. “I believe that’s duranta,” she muttered.

“You know what type of flower it is?” I asked her. “You know, Sophia, you’re pretty knowledgeable.”

A slight blush dusted her cheeks. “It’s only a coincidence. I’ve heard that duranta is a flower that blooms in hot places. For what it’s worth, I know what it means in the language of flowers as well.”

I glanced down at the duranta, then back up at her. “Then...do you want to have it, Sophia?”

“*Huh?!*” Her face flushed crimson. “I mean, umm...sure, I guess?”



My ancestors erupted from where they watched within the Jewel.

“Hey, you there!” the fourth head complained. “Yeah, I mean *you*, Lyle! Don’t go handing flowers to women without a thought in the world! I mean, you could *at least* do some research first! And—”

“Consider where you are,” the fifth head broke in. “Aria watched that entire thing.”

I glanced over at Aria, who immediately looked away.

So she was watching, huh...? I thought. But more importantly...did I, uh...do something I shouldn't have...?

Chapter 34: Eva the Elf

“It’s one of those *Lyle-things*,” one of my ancestors said in disgust. “He just doesn’t think to keep an eye on his surroundings.”

I winced.

I was currently in the round-table room, which was a place inside the Jewel where I could send my consciousness in order to have face-to-face conversations with my ancestors’ resurrected memories. There were seven chairs surrounding the circular table at the room’s center—one filled by me, and the rest filled by my six ancestors. There had once been an eighth chair, but after the founder’s disappearance, it had vanished as well. Now the only reminder that he had existed at all was the broadsword that floated over the empty spot where his chair had once rested.

Why had I gone to the round-table room, you ask? Apparently just to be relentlessly hounded and lectured by my ancestors. To be clear, their criticism had nothing whatsoever to do with the dungeon—my apparent failure lay in my decision to hand Sophia a flower.

There was something off about that flower, I mused. It just keeps itching at the back of my mind.

“By the goddesses...you even did it when Aria was watching!” the third head chided. “I mean, you can give girls as many flowers as you want, but there’s a time and place for such things. You’ve got to wait until there’s no one else around, and—”

“M-More importantly,” I broke in, “that flower wasn’t there when we entered that room, was it? It grew right out of the wall before I even noticed it was there. That’s not natural, is it?”

The fourth head’s posture straightened at this question. He pushed his glasses up his nose with his pointer finger, and the lenses caught the light with an ominous gleam. “Don’t you change the subject,” he said threateningly.

A little shiver went down my spine, but I relaxed when he let out a deep sigh.

“As much as I’d like to continue lecturing you,” the fourth head said tiredly, “a lambasting will not resolve what you’ve done. You better find a present to give Aria and Novem before this dungeon is cleared, Lyle.”

I nodded, but internally I wondered, *Should I really be that worried over a flower...?*

The fourth head turned to look at the rest of the table. “What are your thoughts about this flower?”

The second head folded his arms and said, “I feel like that flower has to carry some sort of meaning. Dungeons carry endless mysteries, though, so dwelling on stuff like that is often a waste of time.”

The fifth head steeped his hands before his mouth. “Duranta...” he muttered, eyes narrowing in thought. “What does that mean in the language of flowers again?”

“I think I’ve heard it before,” the sixth head said, eyes squeezed closed as he attempted to remember. “Maybe...” A few moments passed, and then he opened his eyes, a look of slight irritation coming over his face. “I can’t remember.”

“Well, Sophia seemed to know something about duranta flowers,” the seventh head pointed out. “If you’re curious, why not ask her, Lyle?”

I nodded. *That sounds like it would be the quickest method to get the information I need.*

“While I find the duranta perplexing, I think it’s best for us to shift to dungeon talk for now,” the second head said, tucking his hands behind his head.

“Tomorrow will be the first time Novem and that mohawked spear-wielder will enter a dungeon, so neither of them are going to be able to navigate it properly. You should take it easy, okay, Lyle? Rushing won’t do anything for you until their adjustment period is over.” He sighed. “Something’s bothering me though...”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“It’s Zelphy’s bet,” he replied. “I don’t really like that she pitched your party against another as a game, but what bothers me more is Darrel’s party of adventurers. They...how should I put it...? Seem to bear you some ill will.”

“Ah yes, I see what you mean,” the third head agreed. “I don’t think it’s just Darrel’s party, per se. The rest of the expedition seems to have a rather negative opinion of your party too, Lyle. It’s not the best of situations to be in, I have to say.”

The second nodded in agreement. “You’re up against a bunch of young adventurers who are seething with rivalry. They aren’t the most honorable of sorts either. The whole situation feels like an accident waiting to happen.”

The second head’s instincts might not be as formidable as the founder’s had been, but he was still plenty sharp. When someone like him said something like that, I had no choice but to take it seriously.

“Do you think they’re going to attack us or something?” I asked him.

He chuckled. “It’s possible, but they might end up taking a less direct approach. My gut tells me they’re going to go the sneakier, more troublesome route. Personally, I’m curious what Zelphy has to say about all this.”

You know, he doesn’t look too concerned, I thought. The way he’s grinning at me...is he looking forward to something happening?!

“Zelphy certainly seems to have a few things on her mind,” the sixth head agreed. “And Lyle, remember that this dungeon is far away from the public eye. You don’t know what people are willing to do out in a place like this. Be careful.”

“To be honest, I’m not fully grasping what you’re getting at here,” I told them, scratching my head. “You lost me with all that talk of the bet and ill will...”

I mean, I do find it irritating that Zelphy just arbitrarily made me and my party the subject of a bet, and people’s attitudes toward me do seem pretty abysmal, but I don’t really get what I should be keeping a lookout for...

“This’ll be a good experience for you then,” the second head said with a shrug. “We’re not that knowledgeable on adventurer matters anyway, so we’ll sit back for a bit. Why don’t you try and think over the situation yourself?”

From there, my ancestors launched into a heated discussion of how adventurers handled dungeon subjugation versus lords. They kept saying things like, “I would have done it like this,” or “Why didn’t they do that?”

I offered little input to their debate. I just sat back in my chair and watched to see how their discussion would pan out.

For our second day dungeon-crawling, we’d decided that Rondo and Rachel could sit out. I got up early and headed over to the Guild tent in order to get approval to investigate the area we’d chosen, except...it seemed the task wasn’t going to go so well for me this time.

When I reached the front of the line, Santoire was manning the receptionist desk again. I walked up to her, feeling a bit awkward, and said, “Hey, umm—”

“Next person, please!” Santoire called, completely ignoring me. She processed the person who’d been standing behind me without a second glance my way.

“Oh dear,” murmured the third head. “Seems like you got on her bad side. Not that it matters all that much.”

“I can’t stand this woman,” the fifth head said in an irritated voice.

The sixth head chuckled and said in a calming tone, “Come now, it’s not that big of a deal, is it? It just goes to show that she’ll never amount to anything more than this.”

My attitude yesterday must have struck a nerve, I thought, wincing. Santoire won’t even look at me now. She’ll have to deal with me eventually, though. She’s the only one here to work the desk.

After quite a long wait, the line in front of the reception desk emptied of everyone but me. Santoire dealt with me then, but did not even attempt to conceal how unwilling she was to do so. In the end, I wasn’t even able to get our party assigned to the area we’d wanted to go for the day—we got tacked onto another location instead.

When I turned to leave, the man who’d gone before me was still lingering

behind. He gave me a grin as I passed by, sending a frisson of unease through me.

By the time I got back to the others, Ralph was heartily sick of waiting. “You’re late, Lyle,” he snapped. “The other parties have already headed out.”

I apologized to everyone for my tardiness, though I noticed that for some reason Zelphy didn’t complain.

“Was there some sort of problem, Lord Lyle?” Novem asked, drawing close to my side.

I paused, mulling over whether I should tell her what had happened with Santoire, but Ralph cut in before I had the chance to decide.

“Come on, let’s hurry,” he pressed. “We hardly earned anything yesterday, remember? Going unrewarded for two days is gonna suck.”

“I’ll tell you later,” I told Novem, shaking my head.

I should just focus on the dungeon for now, I decided.

Our second full day in the dungeon was just as fruitless as the first.

We were already way behind since all the other parties had gone ahead of us, and our lost time was only compounded by having to wait for Novem and Ralph to get accustomed to the dungeon’s higher mana density. By the time we really got going, the monsters had all been cut down and the chests had all been collected.

When we’d reported what had happened to Rondo, he’d sighed and told me, “There’s not much we can do about that. Let’s just give it our best again tomorrow.”

Some time had passed since then, and I’d settled into a corner of our campsite where I could have some time separate from everyone else.

As I sat there, I couldn’t help but think that maybe, *just maybe*...

“This is all my fault, isn’t it,” I muttered to myself.

This comment opened the floodgates.

“Of course it is!” the second head exclaimed.

“There’s no doubt about it!” said the third head.

“I mean, I don’t see any other reason...”

“And regardless, Lyle, what happens to your party falls on you.”

“Work harder.”

“Indeed! You should put in a bit more effort.”

I sighed, my shoulders drooping.

They were right—this was all because I’d brushed Santoire off the day of our first dungeon dive. If only I’d handled things better, we wouldn’t be in the predicament we were now, two days into our dungeon excursion with zero profits.

I really kicked the hornet’s nest, huh...? I thought. If I don’t get back on her good side and get our forms filled out correctly, we’re not going to be able to make any progress. And Hawkins doesn’t seem like he’ll be able to help, since he’s busy doing other things. I doubt he has time to work the desk.

“I’ll go apologize to Santoire tomorrow,” I decided.

“No, you won’t,” the second head told me.

“Wh-What...?!” My head jerked up in surprise.

The second head sighed. “Apologizing to that desk girl isn’t going to do much of anything to fix the situation you’re in.”

“Think about it,” the sixth head explained. “That dungeon might be small scale, but it covers a huge area. Do you really think it’s a coincidence that someone is always getting to the treasure before you? I’m not saying it’s sabotage every time, but someone’s definitely setting you up to fail. Let me be clear, Lyle—at this rate, this expedition will put you at a deficit.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. Both my party and Rondo’s party had gone through quite a bit of preparation before heading out to challenge the dungeon, and that preparation had naturally required us to shell out some funds. If we couldn’t make back that investment, then we couldn’t make a

profit.

If we go two whole weeks without making a profit, I thought, feeling rather sick, that'll be a massive loss for us.

“Oh, not a deficit!” the fourth head wailed. “What a terrible word. This whole expedition will be pointless if you don’t make at least ten gold coins back. To be honest with you, I’d prefer you make twice that amount. Do you hear me, Lyle? In order to prepare for this dungeon, you...”

The fourth head’s words faded into the back of my mind as he continued to rant. His miserly nature meant that he could list all the expenses we’d racked up in great detail—and list away he did.

Weren’t they the ones who wanted me to participate? I mused. They’re the ones who told me it would be a good experience, and all that other stuff...

“Hello!” a voice suddenly called out to me.

I turned, catching sight of a girl who looked around the same age as me. Despite her pale skin, her build looked fit and athletic under her loose, comfortable-looking tunic. She had purple eyes that were the same color as Novem’s and Aria’s, and long, wavy hair that glistened gold—or no, was it pink?—in the dim evening light.

That hair color...I think it’s called strawberry blonde...

But it wasn’t her hair color that truly interested me—what drew my attention was her ears. The tips were longer than a human’s would be, coming to a point at the end. I’d seen those ears before in books and heard about them in various rumors, but this was the first time I’d ever seen some up close.

The girl was an elf.

The elf tilted her head, and asked, “What are you doing over there?”

I didn’t really know what to say, so I just tried being honest. “I’m being depressed,” I told her.

The third head burst out laughing. “Lyle, what the hell is that response? You’re just going to make her feel responsible for you.”

“Oh,” the elf replied, seeming a bit surprised at my response. A moment

passed, and then amusement came over her face. “Ha ha ha, well, sorry about that. You seemed real depressed when I saw you, so I thought maybe I’d come talk to you a bit and cheer you up. I never imagined you’d just flat-out admit it to me.”

What’s so funny about my response? I thought, confused. *I don’t get it.*

“Anyway, my name’s Eva. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” She sent me a cheeky wink.

“I’m Lyle. Lyle Walt,” I replied. “Umm, so what brings you here, Eva?”

Now that I’d gotten a better look at her, I realized she wasn’t dressed in adventurer clothing.

Even if she’s not an adventurer, judging by those leg muscles, she’s pretty physically fit, I thought. *I don’t think she’s one of those courtesans, though—she looks like she could handle her own in a fight.*

“What brings me here...? Well, the same things as any other elf. I’m a singer, storyteller, dancer, performer—you name it, I can do it.”

A singer? Well, come to think of it, Novem did say that many elves were performers.

“Are you part of a troupe?” I asked, glancing around curiously. “Is there seriously a traveling act willing to travel all the way out here?”

“Well...” Eva gave me a troubled look. “There is a troupe, but I’m not a part of it. I jumped on their bandwagon so I could travel out here, but when they asked me to sing as part of their act, I, uh...had to turn them down...”

Eva let out a chuckle as she settled on the ground next to me. “To be honest, the adventurers here are pretty mean-spirited. Whenever I’m singing, they try to cop a feel, and the overall mood around camp is just awful...” All of a sudden, her face went hard and angry. “I heard that the campsites of dungeon-subjugation parties are the best place to make money, but you know what? Those people *lied* to me!”

I was speechless at this outburst, so I just nodded.

The anger drained from Eva’s face, leaving her solemn and serious. Before I

knew it, she started telling me all kinds of things about herself. “I left the forest that was my home, you see, and I’m pretty much traveling on my own. The other elves are pretty nice to me, since I come from a famous clan, but I’m still struggling to turn a profit. The rules are so different outside the forest. If I even so much as start singing without permission out here, people get mad at me.”

She’s such an emotional person, I thought, a bit stunned. She’s gone from laughing to seething to depressed, with barely any input from me at all.

“Hey, Lyle...” Eva said all of a sudden. “Would you like to buy my services for the night? I’ll make it cheap.”

I froze at this proposal, looking down into her upturned eyes. I became intensely aware of the way the mounds of her breasts pressed against the cloth of her tunic.

“What’s this?!” the seventh head cried, astir with emotion. “Is it finally time for Lyle to experience a woman?!”

“No way that’s gonna happen,” the sixth head replied, laughing it off.

His condescending tone pissed me off a little. A rebellious urge reared up inside of me.

“Sure,” I told Eva. “I’ll buy your services.”

Eva spread out her arms in delight. “Really?! Thank you, Lyle!” She stood and pulled me to my feet. “Now that you’ve agreed, allow me to tell you the name of my clan. I am Eva of Clan Nihil.” Her eyes were intense on my face. “I don’t know why you’re depressed, but I’ll pep you right up. Despite everything that’s happened to me outside the forest, I’m still quite confident in what I do.”

“Oh? Her confidence is really something,” the third head said in a teasing tone. “Guess it’s time for Lyle to finally learn what it means to be with a woman.”

“Hey, Lyle?” Eva cut in. “Which way is your tent?”

“Ah, err...it’s this way.”

“Can’t say I didn’t see it coming, but good for you for trying, Lyle,” the second

head consoled me.

My comrades and I had already eaten dinner, and we were now sitting and drinking tea as we listened to Eva sing.

When she'd suggested I'd buy her for the night, she'd apparently been referring to her services as a performer, not as...you know.

I'm not disappointed, I reminded myself. *I didn't have any expectations, anyway.*

Eva's song drew to a close, and she wiped the sweat from her brow with a smile. "Man," she said, "it really is nice to sing for a crowd."

Novem held out a drink to her with a polite smile, and Eva thankfully took it to moisten her dry throat.

Her voice really is beautiful, I thought. *And she seems like she's having the time of her life when she's singing.*

"Hey, Lyle," Aria said, tugging at my arm. "When and where did you snatch this girl up? I about had a heart attack when you brought her over here."

"*Snatch her?*" I said, laughing. "If there was anyone getting baited, I'd have to say it was me."

I'd found out that Eva wasn't an official member of the dungeon-subjugation force soon after I'd hired her. This lack of status apparently meant that she wasn't supplied with food or a place to stay while she was in the camp. She'd told me she could have gotten food from the troupe that she'd been traveling with before, but that she'd decided not to since it went against her personal code. Accepting food from someone who had hired her, however...

Aria scowled at me. "Lyle, you need to get a grip. You're in for a world of hurt one of these days."

My shoulders drooped at her harsh words, but Eva soon distracted me from my embarrassment when she cleared her throat and began to tell us another story.

"Well then," she said with a bright smile. "How about I tell you some legends and folklore from the northern reaches of Banseim? I just came from the north,

as a matter of fact. The atmosphere is completely different across the border.”

A large nation called Cartaphus lay along Banseim’s northern border. Plenty of skirmishes had cropped up between the two great powers, some even forming into full-on wars. The land of Cartaphus was harsh and inhospitable, so most of the stories passed down by those who lived there centered around struggle and combat.

“The north, huh?” Rondo said, his interest clearly peaked. “I’ve never been there, but I’ve heard it’s a brutal place.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that too,” Ralph agreed. “Someone told me that there’s so much war up there that even the children are expected to take up weapons and fight. It must be an amazing place.”

“That one *has* to be a lie,” Sophia said after thinking for a moment. “But given what I know about the north, I can’t completely deny it...”

The second head let out a dreamy sigh. “Ah, the north...” he said softly. “My old ma was from there.”

This piqued my interest. *So Cartaphus is connected to House Walt, huh?*

“Stories from the north are often about the exploits of knights and soldiers,” Eva explained to us. “But I came across a tale from there that I thought was quite strange, and it is the one I’ve chosen to tell you tonight.”

And with that, Eva’s story began...

“Once upon a time, there was a small village up in the far north. A young girl lived in the village; she was beloved by the other villagers, and she held her home close to her heart...”

At first the story of the kind young girl was tranquil; it was full of quiet, peaceful days spent close by the village fire. But before long, more unsettling elements began to slip in. A bandit suddenly made off with a swathe of villagers. The kind young girl chased after the bandit, weapon in hand, and raised...raised a *what*...?

Eventually, the girl caught up to her foe, but the scene she found was not quite what she had expected—the bandit and his friends were being attacked

by a ferocious monster! The kind young girl took up her weapon and slew the beast, saving the captured villagers.

Soon after that, a noble who'd heard rumors of the kind young girl's bravery would invite her to be his bride. And so, they all lived happily ever after.

Hold on a second... I thought. So, that kind young girl in the story defeated a monster even a whole group of bandits couldn't defeat? And all by herself?

My party was left staring at Eva, conflicted looks on their faces.

All six of my ancestors were roaring with laughter.

"A kind young girl, she says! More like a decorated warrior!"

"Those northern legends sure are extreme!"

"I wonder what the girl was like? I kinda want to see."

"She might be more terrifying than a bear, that girl."

"It's possible!"

"I'd like to see the house that had the nerve to ask for her hand!"

They all seem quite taken with the tale, I thought, amused. Granted, each in their own special way. There's certainly no lack of things for them to comment on.

Rachel cocked her head. "That was an interesting story, but it wasn't quite what I was expecting. I was thinking a knight or a prince would swoop in and marry the girl, since she was the main character."

I nodded. That was certainly the cliché. A girl setting off on her own to personally slay some bandits was quite out of the norm.

Eva gave all of us a beaming smile. "It's a real story!" she said cheerily. "I heard it when I was up north. It wasn't dramatized like the other tales; it's just an odd one-off."

That's one way to put it, I thought.

"Maybe that girl was like you, Sophia," Ralph says. "Seeing how you're always skulking around with that huge battle-axe on your back and all."

Everyone's eyes were suddenly fixed on Sophia.

"I...I'm not *that* reckless," she said weakly. "And from what I could glean from the story, that girl was confident she could win. She's quite different from me."

"I don't know," Aria said. "You're a lot stronger than most men. You might be more like her than you think."

Sophia stood up in a fit of pique, grabbing Aria by her shoulders and shaking her back and forth in protest. "What part of me is supposed to be like that girl, huh?! I am *very* ladylike, thank you very much! And if you're judging who's more like her over something like strength, aren't *you* the one who resembles her the most?!"

"Sorry, sorry," Aria said, laughing. She didn't fight Sophia off, just let her do as she pleased.

I smiled to myself. *I'm glad those two get along.*

"Did you tour the north alone?" Novem asked Eva, pitching her voice to be heard over all the noise Sophia and Aria were making.

I'd noticed it earlier, but for some reason Eva had remained by Novem's side pretty much the whole night. Novem didn't seem at all bothered by her presence, though.

"I was with another troupe at the time," Eva replied. "Despite all that has happened, I am still a Nihil. The elves outside the forest have been very accommodating to me."

Zelphy's head jerked up. "You're an elf of Clan Nihil? Don't they look after the ancient forest of the elves? I've heard of them, but I never thought they really existed."

Eva's chest puffed out with pride. "Pretty amazing, right? As long as I mention my clan, I never have any trouble hitching a ride with other elves. The singing and performing part...? Yeah, not so much."

All this talk had gotten me curious, and I found myself asking, "So where exactly is your hometown, Eva?"

The air around the camp immediately changed. Everyone's eyes locked onto

me, with the exception of Aria's and Ralph's. Aria was too busy looking at Eva, her head tilted at a curious slant, while Ralph was just glancing between all of us with a lost look on his face.

I looked at Eva in question, but she just smiled brightly back at me, not a word passing through her lips.

Novem was kind enough to break the silence and help me out. "The birthplace of the elves is a secret, milord. Outside of extreme circumstances, no one beyond the elves are permitted to know the answer to your question. If you try to look into it—"

"You'll end up disappearing for some reason," Eva continued, her voice low. "All the humans who try to find the birthplace of the elves do. You should be careful, Lyle..."

I looked at her, eyes wide, and then she suddenly burst out laughing.

"Aha ha ha, I'm kidding, just kidding! Honestly, it's not really a secret. It's just an unexplored region deep in the northern mountains. Humans can't get there, but it's an important place to the elves."

I was left rather baffled. *What's up with the sudden change of atmosphere...?*

"Oh, come on!" Rachel complained. "You've got to be kidding me! I was told never to ask an elf about their homeland, no matter what!"

Rondo nodded, muttering, "That's what I heard too."

Sophia nodded too.

Eva pressed a finger to her lips. "That's just one of the elves' trademark gags. Our homeland really isn't anything special, but we've got to keep the mystery going, you know? Even if you did go out searching for it, you'd only find a normal forest. There's nothing strange about it at all. I bet the elves there would even welcome you when you arrived."

So the secret birthplace of the elves is actually just a long-running joke...? I thought.

To be honest, I didn't much care. It was just a random truth about the world; it didn't affect me in any way.

Novem suddenly started to giggle.

“Novem, you knew too?!” I demanded.

“My apologies, Lord Lyle,” she said, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes. “The air was so tense; I just couldn’t help myself.”

Novem turned to Eva and exchanged a high five with the elf.

“So you did know,” Eva said, grinning at Novem. “And you totally played along! This might just be the start of a beautiful friendship.”

They’re totally on the same wavelength, I thought, baffled. *What’s bringing them together like this? Do they have something in common or what?*

Eva turned to me, her eyes pleading. “Lyle, do you think I can stay here, starting today? I joined this expedition without a second thought, but now I’ve got no way to get food or shelter.” She turned to Novem, her eyes teary. “If things keep going like this, the bad adventurers are gonna get me...”

Novem glanced at me.

There’s no way I can throw her out, I thought, resigned.

I nodded at Eva. “As long as you’re fine with this cramped tent,” I said, “you can stay here for the time being. But you’ll be working for your keep. You’re an elf, so magic should be—”

“You can count on me for bows and magic!” Eva said, thumping a fist to her chest. “We elves have nimble feet too—traveling through the forest is the same as traveling across flat ground to us.”

How very reliable, I thought.

Rondo chuckled, his eyes on Eva. “I haven’t been feeling too great these past few days, but I think I’m a bit better now. I think I see why having a little entertainment every once in a while is so important.”

I reflected on the past few days, and how miserable they’d been. It was my responsibility to keep the morale of my team up—even though Rondo and his party were a temporary addition, I was responsible for them too.

“I’d like us to regain some momentum tomorrow,” I told the group.

“It’s not that you’d *like* to,” the fourth head said from the Jewel. “You should have said you *will*! Three days with zero profit is a hard sell for anybody.”

He’s right, I thought. The other parties are finding chests, slaying monsters, and making money. We can’t stay like this forever.

“But Lyle...” the sixth head said ominously, “at the rate you’re going, you still won’t be able to earn anything decent even on your fourth day in the dungeon.”

Nope, I thought. I’m ignoring that. We should start making money tomorrow. Yep, that’s what I’m choosing to believe.

“Another bust...” Rondo mumbled, his weary voice echoing through the dungeon’s empty halls.

Ralph slammed his spear violently into the dirt. “Dammit!”

Zelphy watched us from where she stood a short distance away, not offering a word of advice. She’d barely given us any instructions after that first day; instead, she’d just kept an eye on us from a distance. It was like she was trying to discern how far we could go with only our own strength at hand.

I looked up at the ceiling, taking in the orange hue slowly creeping into the light that poured through the leaves.

Looks like we only have a few hours left until it gets dark, I thought.

I ground my teeth in frustration, my fists clenching. “Let’s just call it a day,” I managed.

By this point, I knew what was going on. I could see it all too clearly.

When I’d activated Map and Search earlier this morning, I’d been forced to watch, helpless, as multiple teams of adventurers plundered their way through the area we’d been assigned. They’d snatched up all the treasures and even defeated all the monsters.

It’s almost, I thought sarcastically, like they’re intentionally trying to sabotage our chances.

It was obvious, of course, that that was exactly what those adventurers were doing. It was even easy to see how they were doing it—with Santoire so adamantly ignoring me, my party was guaranteed to enter the dungeon last, no matter how early I showed up for assignment. The other parties knew we'd be late, so they had plenty of time to clear our section of the dungeon before we even set out for the day.

They're flat-out ignoring the Guild's coordination efforts, I thought, enraged. *And Santoire...well, I have a feeling she's not assigning me any particularly profitable locations to begin with.*

The worst part about it was that I couldn't do anything to stop it—I could crank my Arts to full throttle all I wanted, but it wouldn't change a thing.

Novem glanced around, sweeping her hair behind her ear. "It seems we are not welcome here, milord."

"This is just terrible, no matter how you look at it!" Aria burst out. "This place is huge; it's just plain crazy that someone manages to get ahead of us every single day! And isn't the Guild's whole job supposed to be regulating their adventurers so we don't run into each other?!"

"If I just had a better grip on things, then this probably wouldn't have happened..." I mumbled to myself.

"We're not gonna earn a single coin like this!" Ralph howled. "If they're gonna do this to us, we should just leave our assigned area and go somewhere else!"

Rondo pressed an exasperated hand to his forehead. "That's against the rules, Ralph. If the Guild found out, they'd penalize us for it."

"Yeah, so?!" Ralph snarled in an ugly tone. "You can't seriously be saying that we should just lie down and take this when someone's clearly breaking the rules to screw with us!"

The two of them descended into an all-out screaming match, but Zelphy made no moves to stop them.

I'll just leave them to it, I thought, walking over to stand closer to Novem and Aria.

“Based on how this has gone so far, milord,” Novem said, “I think we have every reason to believe that we will be immediately reported to the Guild if we choose to break the rules. It seems we’re going to have quite a difficult time overcoming this issue.”

“I know we kinda barged our way onto the subjugation team, but do they really have to go this far?” Aria grumbled. Her eyes kept flicking over to Zelphy as she spoke, like she was waiting for her to step in. “We don’t even have enough people to cover this whole dungeon to begin with—what’s the point of getting in our way?”

Aria was right—the dungeon wasn’t even close to overcrowded. From what I’d heard, a dungeon subjugation force would typically be made up of quite a few more parties than ours was. We’d been left short this time, though, because of the two other dungeons Darion was dealing with. Darion’s Adventurers’ Guild just didn’t have the necessary personnel to form a larger force.

I glanced over at Zelphy, hoping she’d give us some advice, but one look at her face and I could tell it wasn’t going to happen.

The sixth head started to laugh. “Ha ha ha, this is pretty bad.”

I felt compelled to agree.

Chapter 35: The SwordWings

Rex was in a damn good mood.

The leader of the SwordWings grinned at the spoils laid out before him. Four days had passed since his party arrived at the dungeon, and he couldn't help but think that they were doing pretty well for themselves.

"We might have been out sick for the first two days," he told his team, "but it still looks like we'll be able to make a fine profit by the end of the expedition."

Rex eyed the priceless treasures—fine, they weren't *priceless*, but they were still pretty valuable—his fellow SwordWings had obtained from the chests they'd found that day. Gold and silver coins gleamed from the pile, various pieces of equipment tucked among their shine. There was a gauntlet among the loot that looked like it had only just been made; Rex grabbed it and pulled it over his right hand.

"Fits like a glove," he proclaimed, eyes shining as he continued to examine the pristine piece of gear.

One of the SwordWings' other warriors picked up a longsword. "This'll sell for a gold coin at least," he remarked. "But it wouldn't be a bad idea to use it either..."

If we wait until we return to Darion, we could probably sell this haul for more than ten gold coins. If we sell it now...

Rex winced.

He turned and glanced over at one of his scouts; the man's lightly armored back was hunched greedily over the table of treasure. Both scouts on the team were responsible for reconnaissance, but this one in particular was in charge of setting traps as well.

"Hey, Rex..." he mumbled. "Are you sure you want to sell all this to Byron? You know he'll only pay us a fraction of its worth." He shot his party leader an anxious look. "And if you buy wine from him, he'll make you pay double the

cost.”

Rex stared at the scout for a moment before sighing. *You’re not the only one who feels that way*, he thought. *If I had any other choice, I’d be giving these items to the party, or selling them off for a pretty penny. But, unfortunately...*

“We don’t have any other choice,” Rex reminded him. “I don’t want to scrimp here and then end up with a bunch of adventurers getting in our way. You’ve seen what they’re doing to that womanizer kid—you want to end up like him?”

Rex and the SwordWings were fresh meat, just like Lyle and his party. If they wanted to hunt unimpeded, they had to pay the price.

We’ll get all our money snatched away from us anyways if we don’t coordinate with the other adventuring parties, Rex thought, resigned. *Some of those guys live for harassing newcomers.*

One of the other SwordWings lifted his hands in surrender, shaking his head. “Anything but that,” he said with a belittling laugh. “But seriously, how haven’t those guys figured out what the other adventurers think about them yet?”

“One wrong step, and we’ll be in the same boat as them, you idiot,” Rex shot back. “Right, Darrel?” He glanced over at the older adventurer, who had stripped off his metal armor and collapsed into a chair.

“Perhaps,” Darrel conceded with a grin.

Darrel’s age is really starting to get to him, Rex thought. *You can tell he’s not used to wearing such heavy armor. I guess I understand why he chose to go all out for his last job though...*

Rex and the rest of the SwordWings waited for Darrel to continue, but it seemed that one word was all they got. Their expectant looks shifted quickly to frustration. They’d grown used to the older adventurer offering them guidance, but it was clear he wasn’t offering them any more of his advice any time soon. The SwordWings couldn’t even complain—how could they, when Darrel had looked after them for so long?

Rex sighed and let it go, quickly shifting his focus to planning the party’s next moves. “We’ve got to make sure that womanizer kid stays in the spotlight as long as possible,” he told the group. “We’ll focus on earning as much as we can,

while all the other adventurers focus on tormenting him.” He turned back to the treasure laying on the table. “Go ahead and liquidate half of this with Byron by the end of today, and buy some ale and meat while you’re there. We’re going around and giving out handouts this afternoon.”

The scout’s shoulders drooped. “The only thing we’ve been able to eat is vegetable bean soup and that hard jerky we stocked up on,” he moaned. “Now you want us to buy good ale and meat and give it away to everyone else...? We’ve really gotta start climbing that ladder soon...”

The other SwordWings weren’t much happier about his decision, but they soon left their grievances behind as they prepared to head over to Byron’s shop. The discussion shifted to a debate over which portions of the treasure they’d sell, and which they would keep.

Darrel watched them work, a big smile on his face.

“My kids are hopeless so far,” Zelphy told Darrel, scratching at her hair. “It’s deplorable. They haven’t earned a single copper in four days.”

The two of them were drinking and munching on snacks at a bar Byron had opened near the stage where the elf troupe performed. The place wasn’t much more than a few tables and chairs set out under the night sky, but there were plenty of food stalls nearby where you could buy snacks to go with your drinks.

Too bad it’s all being sold at double market value, Zelphy thought sarcastically.

“I wouldn’t mind if you gave your kids a bit of advice,” Darrel said, chuckling. “It looks like all the other adventuring folk decided they could get bold since we were just sitting back and watching the young’uns do their thing. Seems like they’re fine with breaking all the rules if that means they can make a killing.”

With veteran adventurers like Darrel and Zelphy around, normally you’d never see dungeon etiquette breached like this. The only reason it had gotten to this point now was because the two of them had told the other adventurers that they wouldn’t step in.

Their reasoning was simple: the young’uns they’d taken under their wings

needed some tough love.

Darrel's SwordWings had adapted quickly, using the situation as a chance to gain experience currying favor with others. They'd managed to earn a considerable amount by the time the end of the fourth day had rolled around.

By contrast, Lyle's party had yet to earn a single copper coin.

I knew it was going to be bad, Zelphy thought, but I didn't think it would be this bad.

"The other parties are robbing my kids blind in broad daylight," Zelphy complained, sipping at her ale. "They could show a bit of mercy, don't you think? At this point, it seems like they intend to give Lyle and his party the beatdown of their lives. In any other circumstance, I'd give the lot of them a good walloping."

Zelphy's eyes flickered over to the stage where the elves were performing. There were children dancing cheerfully among the demi-humans, most of them young enough they must have just barely reached their teens. Tons of people had flocked around to watch—not just adventurers, but the other members of the subjugation force as well. They seemed completely entranced by the show.

"By the way," Darrel said, reaching a hand out for a snack, "that Lyle boy of yours. You said he was the sort who shows his stuff when he gets backed into a corner, right? You think he's up to something yet?"

"Dunno," Zelphy replied, gazing down into her empty cup and mulling over whether she should order a refill. "He looked pretty down in the dumps today, if I'm telling you the truth. He didn't seem particularly motivated though..." She clicked her tongue in annoyance, eyes narrowing at her cup. "The drinks're too expensive here. I'm calling it a day."

Moments later, Zelphy climbed up from her seat and headed on her way. Darrel saw her off with a wave, which she returned with a slight one of her own.

After that, Zelphy made her way down a road that wove through part of the camp. She hadn't been walking long before she came across an adventurer she didn't know.

"Huh? What's that?" the adventurer snarled. "You talk hot stuff for a guy who

only knows how to keep watch!”

Looks like he's been drinking, Zelphy thought. He's certainly making himself a mess.

From what she could tell, the fight was between the adventurer and a civilian who'd been assigned to help out with the camp. When she listened a bit further, the reason for the fight became apparent—the adventurer had shoved the civilian out of his way. Another adventurer who'd been on lookout nearby had seen what happened and rushed over, causing the first to take on a belligerent attitude.

Zelphy clicked her tongue in disgust. “Sickening.”

She made a show of passing through the scene, glaring at the violent adventurer along the way. Once he realized who Zelphy was, he hurriedly lowered his head and fled.

Most of the folks here aren't much better than that guy, Zelphy thought, feeling a bit vexed. They're all pathetic; they just go around mocking the logistics team and brazenly breaking the rules. The stuff they're doing to Lyle's party... Well, I did want them to go through a bit of hardship, but it's starting to feel like overkill. What should I do...?

As Zelphy wracked her brain over this question, she gazed idly around. She caught sight of Santoire in the distance, surrounded by a gaggle of adventurers.

“I'm countin' on you next time, Santoire darlin',” Zelphy heard one cheerful young man croon. “We're really hopin' to get assigned to that area again...”

Ah, so they're treating her to meals in order to get favors, Zelphy thought.

“You want me to send you there *again*?” Santoire responded with a smile. “Well...if you insist. Oh, but would you mind getting me something to drink?”

The adventurer quickly ordered some wine. “Those kids sure are dumb,” he said with a laugh. “I mean, they're barely even making scraps; shouldn't they have noticed what's going on by now?”

Santoire smiled at him. “You're such a naughty boy, bullying the new recruits like this. Are you sure you should be treating them that way?”

Don't act like you're not in on it! Zelphy screeched internally. She gave her hair an aggravated ruffle as the adventurers continued to fawn over the attractive receptionist.

"Even if Lyle *does* get serious, I'm not sure he'll be able to solve this one..." Zelphy murmured.

Those kids have fallen into quite the trap, she thought. Maybe I should lend them a hand after all...

On the night of our fourth day in the dungeon, I sent my mind into the Jewel to the round-table room.

Typically, such an action was followed by my forebears descending upon me to give their advice. This time, however...

"Four days down the drain, huh?" the third head asked me with a smug smile. "You sure are hopeless, Lyle."

My other ancestors had similar expressions on their faces; it almost seemed like they'd known this would happen.

I sent them a pleading look. "I'm sorry, but this isn't a laughing matter to me. I'd really appreciate your help. If things keep going like this, it'll be hard to say we participated in the subjugation at all."

I went out of my way to come here, I thought. I even invited Rondo's party and everything. I can't let the expedition end this way.

My ancestors exchanged a look.

"Well, if you want my advice..." The second head trailed off, scratching at his temple.

"I do! I do want your advice!" My head snapped up as I gazed eagerly at his face.

He chuckled, gave me a thumbs up, and said, "Well, I've got nothing!"

I stared at him, dumbfounded. It took me several moments to recover myself.

"What the hell kinda response is that?!" I screamed at him. "Give it some

thought, would you? I'm serious here!"

The fifth head scoffed at me. "First you come crying to us because you can't resolve a mess you made, and now you're lashing out because we don't have any advice for you?"

I fell silent. *He really knows how to hit where it hurts*, I thought sullenly.

"Why don't we leave it at that," the sixth head said into the silence. He seemed to be attempting to pacify the fifth head. "We *are* the ones who asked Lyle to join the subjugation force—shouldn't we at least give him a few pointers? And honestly, I'm getting bored of watching him struggle."

The seventh head nodded. "You're right. I think we've already had our fill of laughing at him."

Uh, excuse me...? I thought incredulously. *So they were just sitting in here watching me fail and laughing about it? That's...well, it's terrible of them.*

"You guys are awful," I muttered.

"Oh no, no, no, Lyle, you've got us wrong," the third head said, brazenly lying. "I mean, we've all experienced our share of dungeons, but we're amateurs when it comes to how adventurers do it! That's why we started off by just passively observing. And, as you might expect, we've gotten a good grasp on it now that four days have gone by."

The fourth head removed his glasses, wiping the lenses on a handkerchief. "It's not that I haven't given the issue some thought," he said calmly. "It's just that you should have solved this problem on your own, Lyle. You understand that, right?"

I straightened my spine and turned to meet the fourth head's eyes.

He placed his glasses back over his nose, then graced me with a slight smile. "Don't worry. You can still make up for your losses."

"On to business, then," proclaimed the sixth head. He climbed to his feet. "You'll have to start off by gathering some intel, Lyle."

My brow wrinkled in confusion. *So...they want me to look into the parties who are sabotaging us? But even if I figure out who they are, how am I supposed to*

use that information to stop them...?

This line of thought was cut off by the fifth head.

“You should spend a day looking into the logistics,” he said simply.

Huh...? I thought.

It seemed our thought processes had gone off in two entirely different directions.

What’s logistics got to do with the folks messing with us in the dungeon?

On the morning of our fifth day at the dungeon, my party spread out to inspect their equipment. I positioned myself where everyone could hear me and then cleared my throat.

“Everyone, we’re taking the day off,” I proclaimed.

They all turned and stared at me, their faces stunned.

“If we go into the dungeon, no matter what we do, someone’s going to beat us to the monsters and the treasure,” I explained. “We’ve got to start figuring out how we’re going to get out of this situation, and the first thing we need is intel. That being said, I’d like everyone to start snooping around the camp. Oh—but don’t act alone. If possible, I’d like us to go around in teams of three.”

If we go in groups of that size, the groups are pretty inevitable, I thought. Rondo’s party will go spying together, and my...

My thoughts trailed off as I stared at Eva. She’d come popping right out of our tent and stood right in front of me, like she was waiting for something.

I gave her a disconcerted look. “And I guess...Eva will join us too?”

Eva struck a triumphant pose, clearly happy to be included. Rondo, meanwhile, seemed heartily confused.

“Don’t get me wrong, Lyle,” he said slowly. “I understand you want us to gather intel so we can come up with a plan, but why do you want us to go spying around the camp? And why during the day? If you want to look into the other parties, I think it would be better to do that at night.”

I waved a dismissive hand. “Just look into what you can—I’m mainly looking for info that has to do with the logistics division. I’ll give each group ten silver coins, so feel free to use them to loiter around a bit. Go ahead and try to overhear some of the things our humble support staff have to say. We’ll meet up again at lunch, at the canteen.”

And with that, the meeting was adjourned.

I walked over to join Novem and Eva, forming the first of our groups of three. As I went, I glanced over at the others and just happened to catch sight of Ralph’s face.

Looks like he’s got something to say to me, I thought, but before he had the chance, Rachel cut in.

“You heard the man!” she said, prodding Ralph forward. “Let’s go have a bit of a rest and look around the camp. You too, Rondo! Hurry up!” Rachel paused then, like a realization had just come over her. “Come to think of it...who’s going to keep watch over our things?”

Aria and Sophia exchanged a look, then raised their hands.

Looks like Zelphy’s going to be doing lookout duty as well, I thought. *The rest of us have already grouped up.*

“We’ll take the first watch,” Zelphy said, sighing and giving me a dubious look. “You’ll rotate with us, right?”

I nodded. “Of course.”

The camp for the dungeon subjugation is...kinda strange, I thought as Novem, Eva, and I slowly walked around.

It seemed the entertainers were aware we were going to stay in this location for a while, since they’d taken the liberty of setting up their various acts between the tents of some of the adventuring parties. On top of the visual confusion, the camp was noisy too—even now, in the wee hours of the early morning.

I could hear some of the adventurers who’d been tasked with lookout duty

calling out to each other from their tents. They were making quite the racket, and I soon realized that much of the noise revolved around gambling of some type or the other. The noise was only added to by the elves who wandered around the camp, singing and dancing for loose change. The courtesans were still asleep—they were most active at night—or the camp would have been even more lively.

“The adventurers might think they’re making it good,” the sixth head muttered, “but I bet the merchants are making a lot more, sucking them dry.”

The adventuring world really is odd, I thought idly. It doesn’t seem right for merchants to make more money than people like us, who are risking their lives.

I cast my thoughts off and headed over to a stall, where I bought three meat skewers from a vendor.

The price is absolutely exorbitant, but...maybe I can give them that one, I mused, returning to the girls and handing them a skewer apiece. I mean, they are doing business in a pretty troublesome place.

I dug into my own skewer. “Delicious, but pricey,” I concluded, once I’d polished it off.

“There are a lot of expenses incurred, setting up a stand all the way out here,” Novem explained as she looked around. “Though I’m sure their profit margins more than make up for it.”

I nodded, remembering that there wasn’t even a source of clean water nearby. It would prove a hassle for these stall owners to even procure a drink.

I glanced over at Eva, who was watching the elves who were performing on one of the nearby stages. They were singing to a group of adventurers who’d clearly only come to jeer at them.

They look so young, I thought. Maybe even younger than me.

“Ah, what I’d give to be one of those kids,” Eva said, her shoulders drooping in disappointment. “I wish I’d been born to an elf tribe with traveling troupes. Performing like that is how the children of the troupe polish their craft. They’re lucky if they earn anything at all for it. They’re even luckier if they get to help out with the main show when it goes on at night—they typically aren’t given

the chance.”

I gave Eva a look out of the corner of my eye. *She’s quite the assertive one*, I thought. *To leave home and go off on a journey all by yourself, just because you’re thirsting for more tales of the outside world...*

“Lyle, visiting the stalls is fine and all,” the second head cut in, “but it’s about time you went to see the cooks. You’ll have to switch out with Aria’s team soon.”

I tossed the stick of the skewer into a bin and stalked off deeper into the camp, Novem and Eva following behind me.

“It’s a little early to meet up with the others, milord,” Novem commented.

“I know,” I told her. “I actually wanted to pay the canteen a visit first.”

Novem nodded.

“You want to watch people eat?” Eva asked, tilting her head curiously. “Weirdo...”

The man in charge of cooking for the entire camp was also the owner of a diner in Darion. From the look of his dexterous hands and well-built physique, I thought it was likely he was a former adventurer to boot.

I’d heard of his diner before—it had a relatively good reputation. It seemed he’d left his son behind to run it while he participated in the subjugation force.

It must be backbreaking labor to provide breakfast, lunch, and dinner for all these people, I thought. *There must be several hundred of us.*

He was, of course, being handsomely compensated for his services. Judging by his successful diner back home, I thought it was pretty likely he’d only joined the expedition for the money.

I watched the man from a safe distance as he cooked and ran the canteen.

It wasn’t even noon yet, but all sorts of people were already eating, trying to finish up before the adventurers returned from the dungeon. Most of them were the adventurers who’d been tasked with fetching water or playing

lookout, or the civilians who were tending to the horses, but you could catch the occasional glimpse of a child among the throng too. Apart from them...well, there were all sorts. All working so we could fight without worry.

I quickly noticed that, despite the chef's skill, his patrons muttered complaints as they ate.

"He's serving the same old vegetable scraps and beans *again*?"

"Sure doesn't do much to get me going."

"Man, I'd really love to have something that was a bit more filling..."

Seems like the ingredients are giving him problems, I thought. Those vegetables and beans are terrible, so that's no surprise.

The man silently continued working, but I could hear the strain in his voice as he ordered his assistants around.

"Get me a plate already!" he snarled at one, clearly irritated.

"Y-Yes, chef!" the assistant squeaked in reply.

"That chef's already proven his skills in Darion, but cooking out here is a whole different beast," the sixth head said. "He's struggling with those low-quality ingredients, and having to deal with being put down no matter how hard he tries. If he's already burnt out with his job, I don't think this will work, but...hmm."

When the meal was over, the support people left, their spots quickly being replaced by adventurers. Not the adventurers who had left for the dungeon that morning, of course—these were the ones who'd been left to watch over their party's equipment, or who'd needed to take a day off, or been forced to stay behind for some other reason.

Compared to the previous clientele, these guys were even harsher.

"Ugh, this tastes like garbage."

"Hey, cook, how about you do your job right for a change?"

"Dammit, I know it's free, but I'd rather pay Byron than eat this slop!"

Most of the group of adventurers decided they'd rather pay Byron's rip-off

prices than put up with the canteen's food any longer, so they stood up and walked off, leaving their barely touched plates behind. The only adventurers left ended up being the ones who didn't have enough financial leeway to pay for Byron's food. They ate, but they still griped about it the whole time.

"Are they seriously mocking the logistics team?" the second head exclaimed, sounding shocked. "Are they *insane*?"

"If you get on the bad side of your support staff, you'll be lucky if you manage to fight at all," the fifth head said, scoffing. "Oh, Lyle—Rondo's here."

I turned, soon catching sight of Rachel, Ralph, and Rondo as they made their way through the crowd.

Once we'd reunited with Rondo's team, we'd soon settled down to our meals, which consisted of vegetable bean soup and hard bread. As we ate, my team briefed Rondo's on the information we'd gathered.

Rondo started in on his team's side of things next. I listened intently to him as I snatched up my bread and plopped it into my soup to soak.

"The adventurer party working under that Darrel guy is called the SwordWings," Rondo told us seriously. "Apparently, they've been treating the other dungeon-going adventurers to food and drink. The same ones that are getting in our way, I couldn't help but notice."

Ralph's face wrinkled with discontent. He chugged down the rest of his soup and slammed his bowl onto the table. "To hell with the rules!" he growled. "We're the only ones sticking to them like idiots. I can practically hear the other guys laughing at us!"

"This is the worst!" Rachel said fiercely, irritation settling over her features. "Seriously, it is! I feel like a total idiot!" She gave a violent gesture with her hands, like she was trying to force the sheer extent of her anger out through her palms.

"Ah," the sixth head said, voice filled with glee. "So *that's* the sort of place this is. What are you gonna do about it, Lyle?"

“When in Rome, as they say...” the seventh head chimed in. He seemed to be in high spirits as well. “No wonder the camp turned on you—you didn’t follow the unspoken rules. Still...”

“If that’s why they’re treating Lyle’s party this way, then they can’t really complain when we get even, can they?” the third asked in a low, dangerous tone. “Forget justifying our actions—these people deserve what’s coming to them.”

I could feel my ancestors’ minds churning as they came up with a plan. A sly, sneaky air came off of them that made me feel a bit uneasy.

“Did you notice anything else?” I asked, urging Rondo to continue.

He nodded. “The sutler—Byron, was it? I talked to him, and apparently, this dungeon’s been quite profitable. He urged me to spend some money since I’d make it right back. Though I’m not sure if we should trust a merchant on that one...”

Rachel took over then, planting her elbows on the table as she described the contents of the dungeon’s treasure chests. “From what I heard, they’re mostly full of equipment, gold, and silver coins, with the occasional copper coin. It’s a real mystery, don’t you think? I mean, what are chests like that doing in a dungeon that’s only just formed? I’d heard that the treasure chests in a dungeon were made up of items the dungeon gathered from adventurers it devoured.”

That is pretty strange, come to think of it, I mused. There have hardly been any deaths in that dungeon up to this point—as far as we’ve heard, there haven’t been any at all. So how are such expensive human goods showing up in the treasure chests...?

This question was quickly answered by Novem. “There is a theory about dungeons that could explain the phenomenon,” she told us. “I’ve heard it said that even though we consider each dungeon a separate entity with its own, individual characteristics, they may actually all be part of one greater dungeon. It’s not the most popular theory, but it would explain the appearance of those chests.”

“But dungeons are all so different,” Ralph said, clearly intrigued. “How could

they all be part of the same creature?”

“It’s true that dungeons form in all sorts of places, and are quite different in their characteristics,” Novem explained, “but the theory still holds. An adventurer could be overcome in Dungeon A, for instance, and once absorbed, his money and equipment could then turn up in a distant Dungeon B instead.”

Ralph folded his arms and sank into thought, which was an action he didn’t like to do very often. Rondo, on the other hand, was leaning forward in his seat, clearly invested.

“That’s definitely interesting,” he said. “If the dungeons are all connected somehow, it would explain why treasure chests can form in brand-new dungeons.” He gave a little shiver. “I still think it’s terrifying how the dungeons can just swallow up human corpses, equipment and all. It seems like Guild cards are the only thing they *can’t* swallow.”

Guild cards were mysterious items produced by the Adventurers’ Guild. Apparently, they couldn’t be absorbed by dungeons, even though everything else would usually be swallowed whole. I’d heard that the reason that corpses and garbage didn’t pile up inside of dungeons was because of this strange absorption ability.

The rest of our meal was quickly overtaken by a heated conversation about dungeons. It was only once we’d finished, and Eva turned to me and asked, “So...what did all that have to do with making money?” that I realized how distracted we’d gotten.

Indeed...dungeon theories have absolutely nothing to do with making money, I admitted internally.

The others seemed to have come to similar realizations. I felt an intense urge to drop my face into my hands, but I fought it off and quickly finished debriefing the others on what I’d learned so far.

My team swapped with Aria, Sophia, and Zelphy’s after that, and we settled into watch duty as they headed out to do their own sleuthing.

Inside the dungeon, Rex was waiting for one of the SwordWings’ scouts to

return.

As soon as he saw the other man walking back toward him, Rex straightened from the standby position he'd taken in the corridor. The subtle straightening served as plenty of an indication; he was ready to receive the scout's report. "How was it?" he asked.

"There are five monsters in the room ahead," the scout replied. "I spotted a few goblins down the corridor too. If we get into combat, they might end up joining the battle."

Rex took a step back, tucking himself behind the other two warriors who stood at the front of their party. His men didn't glance after him to see what he was doing; they continued to hold their shields high, their eyes flickering vigilantly around their surroundings.

Now that he could be sure he was safe, Rex took a moment to spread out his map and check out the room he'd sent the scouts to look at, as well as the corridor that stretched beside it. After a quick check, he said over his shoulder, "We'll fight. Two of you should station yourselves at the door to watch out for the goblins, while the rest of us tackle the foes inside the room. It's highly likely that there's a treasure chest around here—our efforts won't be in vain."

The map was a purchase he'd made from the party of adventurers who'd been sent from Central—it was even more detailed than the one the Guild had spread out in their tent.

Not that the Guild's map is particularly accurate to begin with, Rex thought. It doesn't really matter, in the end—that map's still able to serve its purpose, which is all that matters.

Rex glanced over at Darrel as he let the map roll closed, but it seemed the veteran adventurer was still not going to give them any advice.

Does he think there's nothing left to teach us? Rex wondered. Or is there another reason he's acting like this...? Well, whatever. If we show him results, he'll have no choice but to recognize our skill.

With their preparations done, the SwordWings readied their weapons and began to move down the dungeon's corridor. One of the shield-bearers took

the lead.

Soon they'd reached the room they were after, and one of the scouts peeled off from the group to peer inside. He shot a hand signal to Rex, indicating that the monsters inside were still unaware of their presence.

Rex nodded. He turned to face his party and raised his hand high in their signal for "Attack!"

The SwordWings flooded into the room, their most shielded warrior heading the charge. Another shield-bearer stayed at the entrance, prepared to block anything that might come after them from in the corridor. One of the scouts lingered by his side, completing the two-man watch team that Rex had ordered.

"All right," Rex called, "beat those monsters down!"

The SwordWings' magician fired an elementary-level bullet spell at one of the goblins. As it paused, wincing, a monster shaped like a large bee with a sinisterly sharp stinger came soaring after their party. As it drew closer, so did the humming of its wings.

Rex did not falter. He caught the bee's stinger with his shield, then swung the sword in his right hand, slapping the bee into the earth. A single, well-aimed stomp was all it took to end the creature for good.

The rest of the SwordWings were taking on their own monsters. Rex watched as a goblin zeroed in on Darrel. A look had come over its face, like it thought it'd just had a brilliant idea.

It probably thinks Darrel's our weakest member, Rex thought as he watched the monster thrust its spear out at the veteran adventurer.

Darrel fought the monster with grace, each of his movements tempered and smooth, without a hint of waste.

He moves as well as ever, Rex thought before he returned to checking his surroundings.

He turned toward the two SwordWings guarding the door. It seemed quiet, for the moment, but he still called out, "Any monsters?"

"They don't seem to be coming," one of his comrades immediately answered.

Rex instructed them to keep watch while he and the other SwordWings stripped the fallen monsters of their Demonic Stones and materials. They finished the task quickly, then shifted to searching the room to check if there were any chests hidden within.

“I found one!” someone excitedly cried out.

Rex drifted over and joined them, closely observing the wall. He quickly saw what his comrade was pointing at—several branches had curled around one another, like they were trying to conceal something.

“Don’t damage the contents,” Rex warned as one of the SwordWings pulled a dagger and started trying to wrench the branches open.

“I know,” the adventurer replied. “I’ve got this, don’t worry.”

When they finally pried the branches open, all they found was a leather bag, bound at the mouth by a cord of string. They unraveled it to check its contents, which appeared to be a few gold coins, a few dozen silver ones, and a handful of copper.

Could be the wallet of some unlucky soul who fell in the dungeon, Rex thought idly. But whoever they were, it has nothing to do with us.

Rex turned back to his party and declared, “All right. We’ve met our quota!”

The other adventurers nodded and prepared to head out. Once they hit Rex’s daily quota—which he set every morning before they left for the dungeon—they could rest easy.

Before they left the room, Rex called over the supporting SwordWing who was in charge of carrying their bags. He gave him the leather bag he’d pulled from the treasure chest.

“Don’t put it in your main bag, just in case,” Rex reminded the man. “And don’t drop it.”

The supporter, who had a lantern dangling at his hip, and a large backpack full of tools to assist the rest of the party hooked over his shoulders, chuckled in reply. “I know,” he reassured him.

Rex gave him a respectful nod. Even though supporters didn’t take part in

battle, he still considered the man a precious comrade. It was Rex's policy to never treat supporters any differently than the rest of his party members.

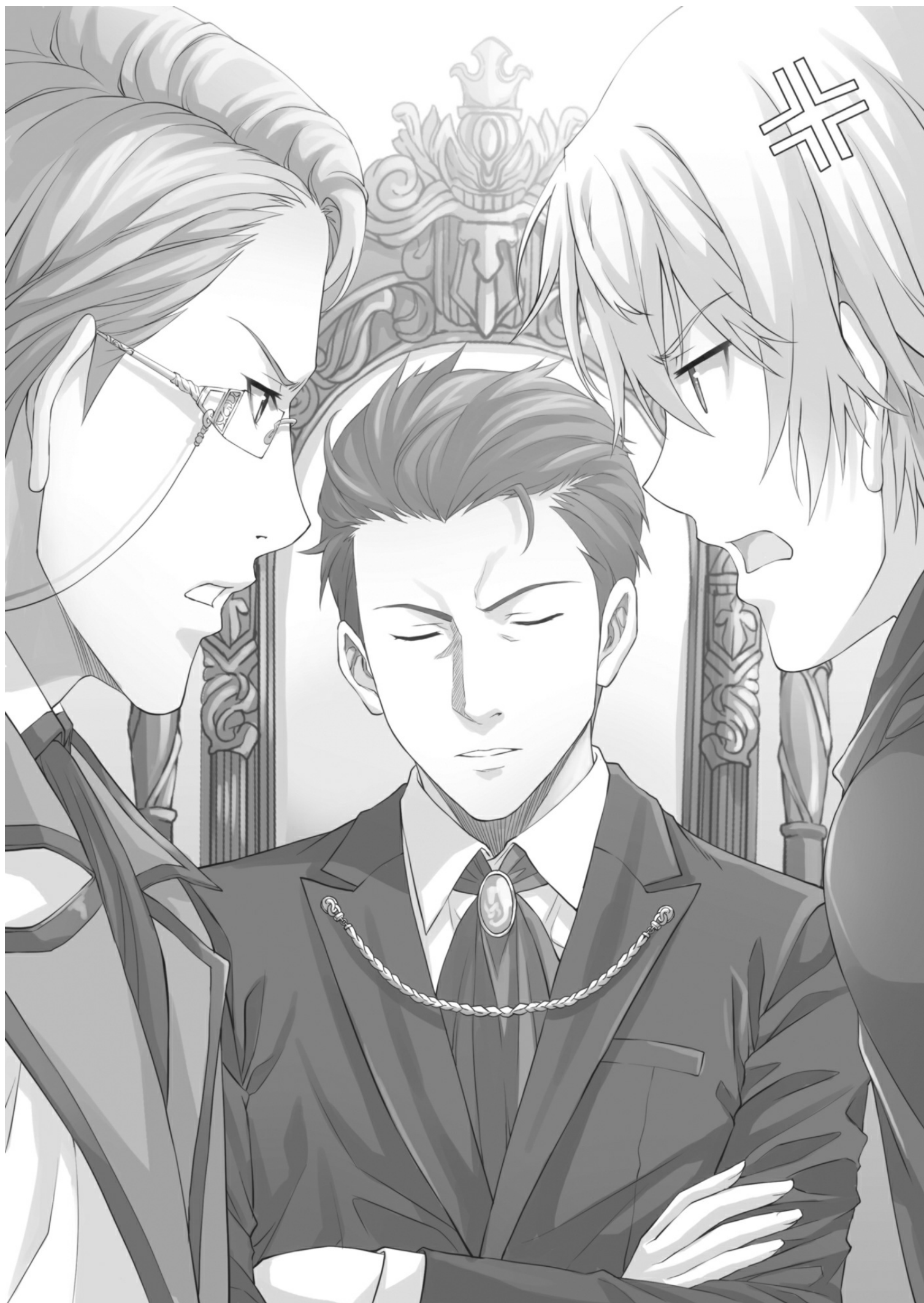
"I've only got two or three more shots left in me," the SwordWings' magician called over to Rex. "I'm feeling pretty tired too. I might have some trouble tomorrow."

"Got it," Rex nodded. "I'll give you tomorrow off. Preserve your magic as much as possible. We might have to rely on you if we run into an orc."

With that said, the SwordWings settled in for a short break, before swiftly moving on to their next location.

Now that we were back in the tent, I asked Novem if she'd watch over our bags so I could get a bit of sleep. Truthfully, I wasn't tired—I just wanted to send my mind into the Jewel. The two states looked the same to anyone else.

Once she'd agreed, I quickly laid down and joined my ancestors in the round-table room. They'd all been sitting around the table, arms folded as they discussed our future plans.



The first thing I heard was: “So they call themselves the SwordWings, huh?”

I glanced over to the second head, who was openly scoffing. “What business does a sword have, sprouting wings? Is that supposed to be one of those ‘the plume is mightier than the sword’ sort of deals?”

The conversation quickly derailed into a discussion of party names after that.

“I mean, I get what you’re trying to say and all, but attack power isn’t everything, you know—party names are pretty important too.” The third head tilted his head back in thought. “In fact...I think their name is rather novel.”

“What does their name matter?” the fourth head said in an disinterested tone. “Anyway, I’d consider ‘SwordWings’ to be quite run-of-the-mill.”

The fifth head didn’t seem very invested, but still seemed inclined to offer his own input. “Sounds a bit too powerful for what they are,” he commented.

“The name *is* a bit flashy,” the sixth head agreed. “They’re pretty bold, calling themselves something like that at such a measly level. Not to mention that most of them don’t even use swords...”

The seventh head let out a condescending snort. “I think the whole thing is shameful. Imagine taking such a name and failing to live up to it. Leave it to a group of adventurers to have no sense.”

In summary, they all hated the name, beyond the third and fourth heads. Those two turned on the seventh in the blink of an eye.

“No sense?” the third head snarled. “*Shameful?* What do you mean by that?”

The fourth head just raised his eyebrows at the seventh head. “SwordWings is a perfectly ordinary name. Must you go so far to disparage it?”

“Yes, I must,” the seventh head said, not relenting an inch. “I absolutely must. Come, now—just say it aloud! You’re telling me you can’t feel how blunt, edgy, and cringe it is...?”

Interesting, I thought idly. They all have such different views, since they were shaped by the era they grew up in. The second head doesn’t look like he gets the name at all, the fifth head thinks it sounds a little off, and the sixth head thinks it’s hilarious. Meanwhile the seventh head thinks it’s so cringe he’s willing to get

into a fight over it.

“Maybe I’ll change my mind if they get a bit more famous,” the sixth head said with a laugh. “But calling themselves that name as they are now, makes it seem like they’re trying to make everyone else think they’re a big deal.” He turned to me. “You really gotta be careful when you come up with a name for your own party, Lyle.”

Suddenly, all their eyes gathered onto me.

I blinked in surprise. *I mean, personally, I...I don’t exactly hate the name SwordWings, I thought nervously. Actually, I think it sounds kinda coo— Hold up! This isn’t the time for this.*

“U-Umm,” I stammered, “I would very much appreciate it if you guys could help me resolve my current situation...”

Their eyes all screamed, “Read the mood!” but the third head eventually sighed and opened his mouth.

“How about we step in and take some action?” he finally said. “We’ve gathered some information now, and honestly, it’s no fun just watching.”

The fourth head nodded. “I agree. There’s nothing fun about losing money and wasting time. Now, what does everyone else have to say on the matter?”

“I think he should just ignore those no-good thugs in the dungeon,” said the fifth head.

Seems like he’s not even interested in humoring the idea of currying favor with people like that, who just nonchalantly break the rules, I thought.

The sixth head grinned. “If you want to win anyone over to your side, you should be focusing on the logistics team.”

“I’m on board with that,” the second head said, snapping his fingers. “Oh, right! Lyle...how about you start having your party practice using your Arts? That way the whole party will be able to make use of them.”

The seventh head’s lips curled as he placed a hand to his chin. “We don’t need so many lowbrow adventurers around,” he commented. “It’s time they realize how outnumbered they are in comparison to the logistics team.”

My ancestors started laughing in deep, low tones. I could feel the malice in their smiles.

Is it just me, or are they starting to look like villains...?

For some reason, I was beginning to pity the adventurers challenging the dungeon.

Chapter 36: Turning the Tables

“Huh...?”

I stared at my ancestors, stunned by their proposed resolution.

“What’s that look for?” the third head demanded. “You’ve seriously managed to get this far without catching on to the plan?”

I shook my head, confusion swirling through me. “I don’t get it,” I told them. “Why would I focus on conquering the logistics team instead of the dungeon...? The dungeon’s what I came here for, right? *Right?!?*”

The fifth head let out a deep sigh. “Listen up, Lyle,” he said, tone flat and uninterested. “The only reason you can fight inside that dungeon is because of the staff giving their all to support you behind the scenes. It’s true that those who risk their lives fighting in the depths are considered the stars of the show, but that doesn’t last long once they start mocking their support staff. *That’s* why you need to conquer the logistics team—you want them on your side.”

“And as for those adventurers you’re challenging the dungeon with?” the sixth head broke in. “They’re all low quality. All the good ones went to clear the other dungeon, so the guys you’re stuck with are the bottom of the barrel.” He stroked his beard. “They’re not unified in the slightest, and far too many of them don’t have a good grasp on what’s truly important. With that said, don’t you think it makes more sense to try and win over the logistics team than that group of idiots?”

I narrowed my eyes in thought. *So they’re saying that if I want to make money, I have to work on creating an environment where I can focus on the dungeon. And if I want to create that environment, then I have to focus on what’s going on outside of the dungeon...?*

The fourth head pushed his glasses back slightly with the tip of his index finger, the lenses gleaming with an ominous light. “Now then, shall we discuss the information you gathered? It’s what I expected for the most part. The main

issue at hand is how much money you'll be able to earn by the time the subjugation ends."

"This dungeon's a jackpot," the second head proclaimed. "I can say that with absolute certainty. My sense of intuition may be worse than my old man's, but it's still sharper than anyone else's here. And that's not even mentioning how much experience I have with things like this. Trust me, Lyle—this is the moment you've been waiting for! This dungeon's your big break!"

The fourth nodded happily, clearly pleased with this statement. "That's good to know," he said. "It's always nice to find out that you've made a good investment."

"You know, it's a bit odd to hear that you're willing to part with money," the seventh head commented.

The fourth head didn't tolerate this statement for even a second—he immediately jumped in with a rebuttal. "Such a statement makes it quite evident that you've got a warped view of my character," he replied haughtily. "Let me clear one thing up for you—when I see a good opportunity, I will not spare any expense. You must take a gamble at some point if you want to make it big, after all. Possessing the confidence to be bold with your funds is as important as knowing when to save them. Though to be clear, Lyle, what you'll be making in this dungeon is a pittance compared to what we made as lords."

The fifth head glanced at me, then leaned over and whispered, "No matter what that guy says, Lyle, his favorite hobby was still counting the gold coins in our treasury one by one. The blasted miser wouldn't have parted with a single one of them if my mama hadn't been around."

I wonder what sort of woman the fifth head's "mama" was? I thought. *I mean, there's no way the fifth head would call his mother that unless he was forced to, and for her to have such power over the fourth head...* For a moment, I dwelled upon the idea that the fourth head's wife might be the kind young girl from Eva's story, but the timeline didn't make any sense. If anything, she'd have been married to one of his forefathers.

"Enough!" the fourth head yelled, pointing a finger at all of us. "Quit your yapping!" Silence fell, and he took a deep breath before continuing. "Now then.

We should begin deciding how we'd like to prepare, keeping our available funds in mind. Food should be our first priority."

"Sweets would be nice," the third head commented, a slight smile on his lips. "It would be popular with the women and the children."

"Ale!" the sixth head cried with gusto. "By the barrel full."

"We should save at least some of the funds to hire elves," the fifth head stated calmly.

The seventh head folded his arms and leaned back in his seat. "Let's get the courtesans in on it too." He grinned. "Ale, women, and food—that's the gold standard, all right. Hmm...we should invite the ones running the food stalls to join us too—they'll feel out of the loop if you start making money before you get them involved. You don't want that to backfire on you and make them hate your guts." With this said, the seventh head's eyes darted back to me. "Looks like you'll want to split your meeting with Hawkins into two parts, Lyle."

I stared back at him, feeling very, very lost.

They're saying so many things, and I don't understand a single word of it! I thought in despair.

This thought spiral was stopped, however, by the second head's hand plopping onto my shoulder. "Come with me, Lyle," he said. "I'm going to go ahead and teach you the second stage of my Art. Oh, and you'll be taking a considerable break from going into the dungeon—you won't be going back in until two days from now."

I stared at him, dumbfounded. "Is that...really all right?"

The dungeon's supposed to be my first priority! I thought. How can I take three whole days off? What if this whole thing turns out to be a mistake...?

"Feeling anxious?" the second head said, giving me an encouraging smile. "Don't worry. Everything will turn out just fine."

Huh, I thought as he walked away, heading toward his room of memories. The second head seems awfully cheerful lately.

The third head glanced over, noticing how I was just standing there when his

father had already walked through the doorway to his room. “Well?” he demanded. “What are you waiting for, Lyle? Get in there! Can’t you see the second head is concerned about you? He’s been forcing himself to be cheerful ever since the founder disappeared, trying to egg you on.”

That’s right, I realized. When we first met, the second head didn’t speak much.

He’d been a laconic huntsman in life, after all—it was no wonder I’d thought it strange he’d been so talkative.

With this in mind, I hurried off toward the second head’s room.

The village that existed inside the second head’s room of memories was quite similar to the founder’s, with several exceptions. The main difference was that the second head’s village was no longer built alongside a nonsensical jumble of fields—everything was far more orderly than back in the founder’s time.

I walked around, taking in the sights as I looked for the second head. Before long, I found myself in the town square, where several archery targets had been placed. They looked like they all saw regular use. The second head was standing among them—he waved a hand, beckoning me closer.

Once I got close enough, he began, “Now then, about my Art. Generally speaking, its effect is to allow me to use any of the Arts I possess on other people. To be honest with you, I’d say the side effect is more useful than its intended purpose, but the main effect isn’t too shabby either.”

I nodded.

The second head’s Art, All, was relatively plain at heart, but it did have an incredible side effect—while it was active, you could accurately gauge the distance between yourself and any applicable target within range. When I’d used it before, it had felt like a sphere had spread out around me, and I’d had perfect spatial awareness of everything within that sphere. Even when I’d closed my eyes, I’d been able to perceive everything that existed within my general vicinity. It was like having eyes in the back of my head, but way more intense.

“An Art’s effects are supposed to become more powerful once they reach the

second stage, aren't they?" I asked.

The second head sent me a conflicted look. "Well, most of the time," he admitted. "You might find mine a bit lacking compared to your Art, though."

Right...my Art...

The name of my Art had come to me after I'd gone through my first period of Growth. It was called Experience, and apparently allowed me to gain experience at a higher rate while it was active. What exactly that meant, I wasn't entirely sure. It was possible it would allow me to pick up skills faster, but I had no clue how effective it was or how easily applicable it would be.

In any case, it appears to be perpetually active, and it seems to have an effect on my surroundings as well as me...

I sighed. At least I knew the name and effect now, but I still had no substantive indication that my Art was doing something or not. My ancestors had just told me it was an "Art formed by the intense desire to improve oneself."

"I know you called my Art extraordinary, but I still don't know how effective it is," I reminded the second head. "And regardless, I'm still curious about the second stage of your Art."

The second scratched his cheek with a finger. He looked a bit embarrassed, or perhaps bashful. "Well, in my case, my Art doesn't change much between its first and second stages. Basically, once you progress to the second stage, the area you can perceive grows larger, and you can apply your Arts to groups rather than individuals. Oh, and you also kinda get a vague sense of the condition of enemies and allies within your space."

"Kinda? That's a bit ambiguous."

"Well, it's better experienced than explained. You can use it in much the same way as you use my first stage, so all you have to do is imagine your field of view widening, and..." The second head stopped and shook his head. "Sorry, that's too complicated. Just use the first stage of my Art and try to expand it to grasp a larger area. My second stage is called Field."

I closed my eyes, activating All as he'd instructed. From there, I tried to

expand my senses further, to push beyond the bounds of the sphere All granted me. And as I pushed, I murmured his Art's name.

"Field."

Immediately, I could feel the sphere expanding. It spread and spread, enveloping the town square the two of us were standing in. The area around us was so completely silent that I could hear the beating of my own heart.

When I saw the second head through the lens of the second stage of his Art, I froze. It was like looking at a lump of pure mana—it was abundantly clear that he was not human.

"That's the spirit, Lyle," the second head said. Though my eyes were still closed, I could sense that he was smiling. "You picked it up quite easily. Hopefully you're able to understand what I meant a bit better now." His smile grew a bit wider. "My old man already said it, but Lyle...you're amazing."

When I opened my eyes, he was smiling, just as I had perceived him. I felt strangely embarrassed. "You...really think so?" I asked him, flushing. "I can't tell myself."

He gave me a look that was troubled, yet happy all the same. "You could stand to have some more confidence in yourself, Lyle," he urged me. "Now, let's continue. You should know that I'm teaching you my second stage for a reason—the same reason that you'll be taking two days off from the dungeon."

I strained my ears; I wasn't about to let a single word slip by. *What reason could there be for taking two whole days off?*

"Our reasoning is simple," he continued. "You'll use the first day to learn how to apply the fourth head's Art, Speed, to all eight members of your party. Once you're able to do that, your party will be able to blitz the entire dungeon and make it to the center before anyone can stop you. That's where you guys'll make it big."

I cocked my head in thought.

As the subjugation team was now, there were no parties skilled enough to clear the dungeon in one go. The dungeon spanned a considerable distance, despite its small scale, and on top of that, the innermost chamber had yet to be

found. Thus, the parties tackling the dungeon focused on making progress in small increments, never spending a night within the dungeon's walls.

With these thoughts in mind, I focused back on the second head. "Umm, okay. So that's one day—what about the other one?"

He scoffed. "Well, that's obvious. The second day will be spent enacting a plan to sway all the leaders of the logistics team to your side. Our instructions may sound complicated at first, but really all you have to do is procure food and gather some additional help."

I sighed.

"What? You have something against that?"

"No, that's not it," I assured him. "It's just, the Guild brought us all together so we could work as a team to clear the dungeon. It feels...well, it feels wrong that we're trying to drag each other down."

Clearing the dungeon should have been impossible for a party to do alone, so the Guild had put in the effort to gather a large force to work together and accomplish the task. And yet, everyone was only in it for themselves.

If I went through with my ancestors' plan, I'd be acting just like those other adventurers. It was something I struggled to accept on an emotional level.

I gave the second head a troubled look. "I know it's not realistic to ask everyone to get along, but if they could all just follow the rules..."

The second head stared at me for a long moment, then turned to gaze out over the tranquil village. Sadness came over his face. "Lyle..." he said softly, "it doesn't matter when, where, with whom, or under what circumstances—humans will always find a reason to fight amongst each other. That's just a fundamental aspect of our species."

"That's...a bit sad," I told him honestly.

The second head let out a light chuckle. "Yeah, it is. But that's also what makes it so precious when we humans are able to accomplish something as a group. You should hold on to that." Abruptly, a deep flush came over his face. "Forget that I said that. It doesn't suit me."

He turned around, quickly ushering me back out of his room of memories.

It was evening when I woke up. Aria's team had already returned by then, while Rondo's party was busy making a fire before night fell.

"It's precious when we can accomplish something as a group, huh?" I muttered thoughtfully.

The sound of someone stirring came from next to me.

"Hmm...? What?" a voice mumbled sleepily.

I turned, blinking at the sight of a drowsy Eva clutching a pillow to her chest. I could only come to the conclusion that she'd laid down at my side and joined me in my afternoon nap.

I don't really know what to say... I thought awkwardly. I froze up and just stared at her as she wiped a sleeve over her mouth. *Was she...drooling...?*

I shook myself, casting off my confusion. "It was nothing, Eva; I was just talking to myself. I'm guessing you're planning on staying with us again tonight? Are you going to be joining us for dinner as well?"

She smiled at me, her hair still slightly disheveled. It wasn't the seductive smile she'd sent me on the day we'd met, but something softer and more innocent, like the expression of a child. "I'd love to join you again. But, well...not for free. I'll sing for you again, and I have loads of stories—"

"I'll count on it," I told her. Her insistence on paying me back made me feel comfortable in making a request of my own. "Actually, I have a bit of a larger job I'd like you to do as well. If you agree, I'll pay you for your time."

The moment she heard the word "pay," Eva's eyes widened, her smile spreading into a grin. She clapped her hands together in front of her face. "Well, let's hear it!" she cried excitedly.

She really wears her heart on her sleeve, I thought, amused. *Her expressions change like the weather.*

I sent Eva a wry smile, then called Novem out from her place inside our tent.

By the time I'd explained the plan, night had fallen. The camp was deadly silent now that I'd made my case.

I glanced at the rest of my crew, who were sitting around the bonfire we'd set near our tent. Rachel was shuffling around in a panic, trying to clean up the tea she'd spilled in her shock, while Ralph still sat frozen with his mouth hanging open. Zelphy had covered half her face with a hand, while Eva looked at me with intent, enthralled eyes.

The only ones who seemed close to their typical selves were Aria and Sophia, who had merely exchanged looks, and Novem, who just nodded at me in agreement, as if what I'd said was entirely normal.

Rondo straightened in his seat, clearly intending to speak for everyone. "So, uh, to summarize..." he began, "our party won't be entering the dungeon for a while. We'll be launching a plan to curry favor with the logistics team instead."

"Yes," I said, nodding.

The group just continued to stare at me. *Maybe I should use the ancestors' words as justification*, I thought desperately.

I cleared my throat. "If we just sit back and keep going at this rate, we won't be able to make money no matter what we do. That being the case, I think it's time we change the terms of this competition. I won't let our party leave this subjugation with nothing to show for our hard work."

"I-I'll admit it'd be amazing if you could do that," Ralph stammered, climbing from his seat. "Really, it would be. But...where would our party get the coin? From you...? Maybe I'm too dumb to fully understand what's going on, but it seems like you guys would be the only ones losing out here. I mean, far as I can tell, there's no guarantee that we'll be able to rake in a large sum by the end of all this..."

Ralph wasn't wrong to be concerned for our party—we could probably achieve the same results with a smaller team, depending on how we went about it. It was too late for such thoughts now though—my mind was made up. Plus, my ancestors in the Jewel had already put their minds together to

formulate our plan, and they were not going to back down.

“That guy with the mohawk is a good kid,” the third head said. “He might look like a delinquent, but he’s got a good heart.”

Yeah, I agreed internally. Ralph might look scary sometimes, but he’s got a gentle side too.

I glanced over at Novem, giving her a quiet signal. She produced a few leather sacks and placed them on the nearby table. Each one bulged with gold coins.

“Those sacks contain the reward we received from completing Lord Bentler’s request,” I told the group. “They should provide us with enough funds to get the logistics team on our side.”

They all gave me dubious looks.

I leaned forward. “Don’t worry. If my hunch is right, we can make every cent back in this dungeon, plus more.” I said every word with confidence, hoping I could trick even myself into thinking this could work. “We can’t let this chance slip by. I’d rather us try and fail than just give up and have all our time be wasted! So, how about it? Will you join me on this operation?”

Suddenly, Rondo burst out laughing. Everyone jumped in their seats, turning to give him startled looks.

“Uh, Rondo?” Ralph asked, voice wary. “Did you lose your mind or something?”

“No, no, I’m sane,” he said, grinning. “Though Lyle drove me a little crazy despite that, just now.” He turned his laughing gaze to me. “You’re an interesting kid, you know that?” When I didn’t respond, he just relaxed back into his seat with a smile. “You can count me in. If we return empty-handed, then what was the point of joining the expedition at all? Plus, I seriously want to teach those folks who’re breaking dungeon rules a lesson. Them and everyone else who thinks they can get in our way.”

I blinked at Rondo. He might be wearing his normal affable expression, but he seemed to be in quite a daring mood. Ralph still seemed dubious about the whole thing, but he started nodding the moment revenge was brought into the conversation. As for Rachel, I couldn’t quite tell what she was thinking, but I

could see Rondo's new attitude had brought a flush to her cheeks.

I couldn't help it—I laughed too. "I like the sound of that," I told Rondo. "If we're all in agreement, let's get started."

"Hold on, Lyle," Zelphy barked, unable to hold herself back anymore. "That's a helluva lot of money you're putting down, and I don't see that you have *any* prospects of getting it back—"

"Miss Zelphy," I said firmly, stopping her tirade mid-sentence. "I think you've been keeping quiet for a reason, so why don't you just stand by and watch over us until this is all over? An adventurer should never be *too* adventurous, right? I don't think that idea's overly outlandish—in fact, I think it's so normal that nearly everyone would agree with me."

Zelphy's mouth shut with a snap. "Why is it only now that you show any motivation," she mumbled crankily to herself. She didn't make any other moves to stop me, though.

Here we go, I thought. Time to give our all to enhancing the abilities of the logistics team, and creating ourselves a situation that'll give us the advantage.

"All right, guys," I called, grinning. "Let's get flashy."

We got to work bright and early the next morning.

The first thing we did was decide who was going to play what role in the plan—the first task I was given was finding Hawkins before he managed to finish his breakfast.

This was quickly accomplished, and I casually situated myself close to where he sat, ordering myself an identical meal.

It didn't take long for Hawkins to notice me. "Oh, hello there, Lyle," he said, eyebrows raised slightly. "Did you need me for something?"

"Not really," I replied. "It's just, Mister Hawkins...the adventurers really look down on the food served here at the canteen. I know that the cook is doing his best with what he has, but with ingredients like *this*...well, I guess not much can be done."

A sour look crossed Hawkins's face. "Well, that hurts to hear. I've got to admit that falls on the Guild—this all happened so suddenly that we failed to secure enough ingredients to last us over the whole expedition. You have my apologies."

I waved this off. "Actually, Mister Hawkins, my party and I have decided to host a modest get-together. Would you like to join us?"

Hawkins's expression turned grim. "Lyle," he said, tone hard and stern, "I shall take care to regard this as an innocent invitation and nothing more, but I want to make myself very clear—I do not recommend making such offers to other Guild staff. Please act more prudently from now on."

I blinked up at him, not expecting this reaction. *Wow*, I thought. *He got angry at me.*

Hawkins sighed, running an irritated hand through his hair. "Also, make sure you come and consult with me if something happens that causes you concern. You don't need to suck up to me to get my help. I'll offer whatever assistance I can, as long as it's within the scope of my job."

"That's our Hawkins!" the third head cried in delight. "That man doesn't take bribes, and he does his job right! He's our guy! I mean...just compare him to *Santoire*."

"I'd hire him, given the chance," the fifth head muttered.

"Really?" the sixth head asked, decidedly less enthused over this notion. "I think the guy's too serious. He wouldn't be any fun."

"A delinquent like you needs a Hawkins or two to set you straight," the fifth head shot back.

I ignored them, focusing on Hawkins instead. "I beg your pardon, Mister Hawkins. The truth is, it seems Santoire doesn't like me. She always waits until the very last second to assign me anywhere. I was hoping you could put in a good word for me."

Hawkins rubbed at the corners of his eyes. "I'm sorry, Lyle. That one falls on me. Usually I'd be the one running the desk, but the Guild staff has so much going on right now..."

“It’s okay,” I assured him.

After that, we exchanged some small talk before we both got up and parted ways.

“Oh, Mister Hawkins,” I said, smiling at the older man, “about the get-together I mentioned. Please feel free to drop by if you change your mind.”

He just gave me a troubled smile, then walked away.

My next stop was Byron, the sutler. I set my course for his shop, but made a detour along the way to meet up with Aria, Zelphy, and Sophia. Their job for the morning had been to make contact with the head cook at the canteen.

“How did it go?” I asked them.

“It was a huge success!” Aria cried, pumping her hand into the air. Her fingers were stretched out in a V—I presumed the letter was supposed to represent their stunning victory. “The cook said he’d follow our plan as long as we got everything set up for him. He didn’t even ask us for any additional money!”

“He seemed quite frustrated,” Sophia reported in a much more serious tone. “It’s no wonder, with all the effort he was putting in...”

I gave them a satisfied nod, and then the four of us headed off to enter the sutler’s domain. Zelphy came with us, despite the fact that her face had contorted into an expression that was deeply uncomfortable to look at.

We found Byron running a stand he’d set up close by his large carriage. He rubbed his hands together as he saw us approaching.

“Welcome!” he cried, smiling. “I see you’ve finally decided to drop by. How can I help you to—?”

He was cut off by a loud thump. The sutler stared greedily at the sack of gold coins I’d slapped onto the counter in front of him.

“Hmm...” he rumbled, his tone quickly turning shrewd. “I am at your service, boss.”

“I need you to procure a variety of things for me,” I told him. “First, I’ll need

you to provide me with a large stock of spices, seasonings, and ingredients. I'd like to buy enough to feed everyone participating in the dungeon subjugation for the rest of our expedition."

Old Byron's eyes grew sharp. He adjusted the cap he wore slightly before replying, "My, my, how high-handed of you. If you wanted to improve the food situation, all you have to do is hire me or anyone else with a stall open—"

"That's a separate matter," I proclaimed, cutting the sutler off a second time. "That's not what I'm interested in doing right now—instead, I'd like to give the chef at the canteen what he needs to provide us with some decent meals. This gold here's only an advance payment. Do the job, and there's more where that came from."

Old Byron fell into thought. "I'll have to replenish my stock; what I've got stored away won't even last you three days." A smile spread slowly across his face, turning into a terrifying sneer by the end. "Is there anything else you're interested in purchasing?"

"I'll need some sweets, if you have some," I replied. "Preferably the type that comes in bunches, so it's easy to distribute to multiple people. I was thinking I'd like to hand some out. Beyond that, I'll need ale by the barrel full. I'd like to treat the whole subjugation team to a drink."

Byron's hands were rubbing together ever more strongly now. "Why, what a magnificent customer! Anything else?"

"I want to hire your girls—to help out, I mean. I'd like to hire all of them, for a time period of around two days. Will that be a problem for you?"

The sutler's expression turned conflicted. "Well, we do have a few girls who are seeing regular customers," he said slowly. "I'll only be able to hire them out on a case-by-case basis. The rest of them are all yours. The cost, now...that'll be somewhere between three or four of those sacks of yours."

I smiled and nodded. "Works for me. That's about what I expected it to be."

Byron's eyes narrowed. He looked me up and down, then cleared his throat. "*Ahem*. My apologies, boss. I haven't done the finer calculations yet. It might end up costing a bit—"

“Now, now, my good sir,” exclaimed the fourth head from his place within the Jewel, “keep those lies to yourself. I already know the price of everything you have in stock, and there’s no way the price has changed that drastically in only a few days. I won’t let you rip us off any more than you already are!”

“Byron,” I said slowly, leaning in close to the old man. “A little birdy already told me the price of each and every little thing you’ve got here. Some things might be subject to a little inflation, it’s true, but let’s be honest here—the prices we’ve agreed to will do you just fine.”

Old Byron scowled. “What’s this? You’ve already looked into me?” The sutler turned and glared at Zelphy. “Or maybe you heard it all from *her*?”

Zelphy raised both hands up in denial. “Why the hell would I remember the price of all the goods in your store?!” she demanded vehemently. “That kid’s just crazy.”

Well ouch, I thought, a tad annoyed. *That certainly stings a bit.*

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to ignore Zelphy and focus back on the elderly sutler. “So...” I drawled, “what will you do? I don’t think my offer is at all a bad deal for you. Do you *really* want to try your hand at raising the price anyways?” I raised my brows, keeping my voice casual and bored. “Not that that would be a problem for me—I received quite a hefty amount of funds from Lord Bentler once I completed his request.”

Name-dropping Lord Bentler was just as effective as I hoped it would be. Old Byron was no fool—he sensed the threat I was implying by demonstrating my closeness with the lord of Darion.

“No, no, boss, that won’t be necessary,” the sutler replied hurriedly. “I’ll stick to our original agreement. You can’t blame me for trying—I am a merchant, after all.” He inclined his head to me. “I’ll get started right away. I’ll have to head over and speak to the chef first, to see what sort of tools he’s got. It would be pointless to give him ingredients he couldn’t adequately prepare. You wouldn’t mind paying for whatever items he’s missing, right?”

I held back a laugh. *That old man’s got such a relentlessly mercantile spirit*, I thought, amused. *It’s almost respectable, in a way.*

“I wouldn’t mind at all,” I told the sutler. “You can inform me of the cost later.”

Old Byron nodded. “Just make sure you can put your money where your mouth is,” he reminded me.

I didn’t get a chance to reply—the old man took off in a hurry.

While Lyle and the others were busy dealing with the sutler, Eva was pulling Novem along by the hand, guiding her to the tent where the elf performers were staying.

It wasn’t hard to pick them out from the crowd—it was immediately clear who the performers were by how much more comfortable they appeared with lodging in a tent than the others camped beside them. The elves’ ease at outdoor living was only natural, since they lived a transient lifestyle.

One of the elvish women noticed Eva and waved a hand in greeting. “What, you’re already throwing in the towel and running to us for help?” she teased with a smile. “Your willpower is lacking, princess of Nihil.”

Eva didn’t seem at all fazed by the elvish woman’s joking tone. She burst out in a theatrical rush of laughter. “Oho ho ho ho! Are you sure you should be speaking to me in such a manner?” her voice turned so condescending it was palpable. “And here I am, having brought a first-class customer right into your grasp...”

The elvish woman lowered her head. “We always knew we could count on you, princess. To think—you’ve finally used your negotiation skills to bring us some profit! What a joyous day!” The woman lifted her head a little, amusement flashing in her eyes. “It seems you didn’t turn out to be a complete freeloader after all!”

Eva’s eyes narrowed, her third-rate acting persona quickly being overtaken by genuine irritation. “Hey! What are you trying to say, calling me a freeloader?!”

If they’re calling Eva the Nihil Princess, Novem mused, that means she must have the chieftain’s blood. And in that case...

Several elves chose that moment to step outside of their tent. “A customer, you say?” one of them asked.

Novem gave the elves a polite curtsy. “Truth be told, I’ve come with a job offer for you,” she told them. “The leader of my party is planning on holding a grand banquet, and we’d like to request that your troupe help us advertise. We’d also like you to provide entertainment during the event.” Novem held out a small bag of gold coins. “This is the payment we are offering.”

An elvish man—seemingly the troupe’s representative—took the bag, eyes wide.

The elvish woman from before, who was standing behind him, let out a long whistle. “Wow, that’s quite the payment!” she exclaimed.

“There’s no way we could take this much for a single day’s performance,” the elvish man said, giving Novem a disbelieving look. “I mean, this much money—”

“It won’t be for just a day,” Novem cut in. “We’ll require your services after the banquet as well. We’d like you to spread a message around for us—namely, that the leader of our party was the one who improved the food situation. We’d ask that you heap some praise on him too, within limits, of course.”

This dissemination of rumors was what Lyle truly wanted from the elves. Their positions as performers would allow them to subtly spread certain messages throughout the camp—true messages, mind you.

“Understood,” the elvish male replied. “We’ll put our all into it.” The other elves standing around him nodded. It was clear they were not bothered by such a request—it would be relatively simple for them to do, and didn’t seem as if it would cause hurt to anyone else.

“On that note,” the elvish man continued, “could you tell us what kind of person your leader is?”

Novem didn’t answer straight away—she took some time thinking over her response. *It doesn’t feel right to exaggerate too much*, she thought. *And I want all the rumors to be on the same page—*

“I know!” Eva cried, raising her hand. “I’ve been staying with them a few days, so I know all about him!” A big grin came over her face. “He’s amazing, like a

hero taken straight out of a myth, even including all the dramatic irony and pitfalls. He's a man who can play the lead and comic relief all at once! I'm totally serious—you don't come across a human like Lyle too often."

This rant set the rest of the elves' hearts ablaze. The elvish man who was representing them pressed Eva for more details, and the more interesting stories she told them, the more their eyes sparkled.

"I *must* hear more," the elvish man proclaimed. "Learning information such as this is an important step to doing our job." His eyes swept over the small crowd that had formed around them. "To the tent, all of you! And someone prepare us tea and sweets! You two come as well. This is vital for our work!"

"B-But of course," Novem stammered, a bit overwhelmed.

What should I do? she thought worriedly. *The elves appear to be quite worked up now... I hope this choice doesn't cause problems for us.*

Novem stepped into the elves' tent, feeling rather baffled. Little did she know that she would be forced to remain there until night fell.

Chapter 37: The Hijacking

“Did I really have to come here when I’m busy with everything else?” I grumbled to my ancestors.

I was standing outside of the tent that had been pitched for the adventurers from Central. It was a larger tent than most of the others, and had clearly been put together with more care.

The ancestors had sent me here out of curiosity, since we’d overheard that you could obtain a more detailed map of the dungeon here than the one that was being distributed by the Guild. Even if the rumors were true, I didn’t exactly need a more detailed map—I had the fifth and sixth heads’s Arts to rely on. But that didn’t make my ancestors any less curious about the level of detail the Central adventurers had been able to glean using only their Demonic Tools.

“Looking at one of their maps will show us how useful their Demonic Tools are,” the fifth head admonished me. “We’re going to need that information going forward. And anyways, I’d like to take a look at these adventurers from Central.”

I drifted closer to the tent and called out a greeting. I waited a moment for a response, and then finally someone called back, “Come in!”

My first thought upon walking inside was, *Whoa, this is luxurious.*

I blinked, taking everything in. There was a row of measuring instruments—I couldn’t be sure if they were Demonic Tools or something less magical—hanging on one of the walls, each boasting a peculiar shape. Some of the instruments were embedded with gemstones, though I couldn’t tell whether they were merely decorative, or if the stones had some deeper significance. They *did* seem to be giving off a mysterious glimmer, though...

How curious, I thought idly, scanning the rest of the room.

Now that I’d adjusted to the lavishness of the tent’s interior, I noticed there were adventurers seated on chairs scattered throughout the room. They all

seemed to be up to something or other.

Suddenly, I felt incredibly awkward. “Umm, excu—”

“If you want a detailed map, it’s one gold a pop,” one of the adventurers said, cutting me off. He shoved a piece of paper in my direction. “The dungeon’s interior changes every day, remember. Keep that in mind.”

I accepted the paper and parted with a gold coin, still enveloped in my own confusion. The eldest adventurer jerked his head toward the tent flap, not so subtly indicating it was time for me to get lost.

Well, doesn’t look like conversation’s on the table, I thought.

“That upstart adventurer’s getting in over his head,” the seventh head snarled. “Who does he think he is?”

The second head was still focused on the instruments hanging on the wall. “Are those Demonic Tools?” he asked, sounding intrigued. “They all look pretty expensive, with those gemstones inlaid in them, but the people using them don’t look that strong. I think Lyle could take any one of them as long as they didn’t have their equipment.”

So, to summarize your point, second head, I thought, *if those guys have access to their equipment, there’s no way I can beat them.*

The second head let out a discomfited little hum, almost like he could hear me. “It still bothers me how unmotivated they are about the dungeon, though,” he muttered. “They look like they have their fair share of experience, so why...?”

I didn’t have any answers for him, so I took advantage of his silence to say my thanks to the adventurers from Central and excuse myself from their tent.

The second I was out, I unfurled the map I’d bought from them, examining it carefully. It didn’t seem that impressive to me at all—it only had a few more details than the Guild’s map.

Is this really all Demonic Tools can do...? I wondered. *Map and Search are infinitely more impressive than this.*

My ancestors seemed to be more impressed than I was, though. “A Demonic

Tool can glean this much information from the area around it?” the fifth head demanded. He sounded absolutely astounded. “I wonder how much one of those things costs...”

“Demonic Tools are pretty expensive,” the seventh head told him, “but so are the mana sources that power them; I’ve heard there are some Demonic Tools that can’t do a thing without one. Mana Crystals are the most commonly used source—they’re essentially gemstones that store mana. Judging by what I saw, the Demonic Tools those Central adventurers have could sell for anything from a few hundred gold to a few thousand. The Mana Crystals that are set into them would at least double that price though.”

“But if that’s all it takes to get such a detailed map...” the fourth head murmured. “But no, you’d need to pay for maintenance, and you’d need to have someone on hand who could operate it properly...” He nodded to himself. “No wonder there are no adventurers in Darion capable of using such tools. The amount of money required is far too much for the small fries to pay.”

“That aside,” the sixth head said, swiftly changing the topic, “Lyle, it’s time for you to throw your joyous banquet! Have some fun while you’re at it! After all...you’re the one who’s paying!”

Well, it’s not exactly my money, I thought. It’s the party’s money. But...whatever.

At this point, I had no choice but to see things through. So I folded up my new map, tucked it away, and returned to our tent.

As evening fell on our sixth day at the dungeon, our party was winding up to full swing. The elves were putting on a performance right in the heart of the camp, dancing and singing as flocks of courtesans poured drinks and passed them out among the hardworking logistics staff. Food stalls shot out dish after dish at an insane rate—they seemed doomed to run out of ingredients before long.

“Drink up!” a voice called from within the throng. “This is all a treat from that Womanizer you know and love, Lyle Walt! Suck those drinks down and cast your daily frustrations away! Womanizer’s orders!”

Men rushed forward, grabbing flagons of alcohol from the courtesans before delightedly tackling the food lining the tables set up in the center of the camp. Those too young for alcohol were handed juice instead. Meanwhile, elven children darted through the crowd, dropping sweets in the hand of any other children they found.

The whole thing was quite obviously a publicity stunt; it was a blatant, pandering one at that.

I watched from a short distance away as the merriment unfolded. “Are you sure this’ll work out all right?” I wondered aloud.

“Everything will be *fine*,” the second head reassured me. He pointed out the bewildered faces of the adventurers who’d just returned from the dungeon. They stared out over the chaos, dumbfounded, as courtesans swept over and dropped flagons in their hands as well.

Looks like everyone is eating and drinking on my tab, I thought. *No matter who they are.*

“Why didn’t we restrict who was allowed to participate?” I asked my ancestors.

“It would have been a pain to sort them out,” the third head explained. “It wouldn’t have been worth the trouble. And anyways, we aren’t trying to crush them or anything. If we drive them too far into a corner, they might end up attacking you while you’re in the dungeon.” He chuckled. “Though to be honest, those lot are shameless scoundrels, so they may well attack you regardless.”

“You have to understand, Lyle,” the sixth head said, picking up the line of the conversation. “We’re not trying to mess with the other parties. We’re just bypassing them and hijacking the logistics team!”

“That sounds even worse than messing with them!” I shot back.

“Lyle, you’re supposed to be hosting, remember?” the seventh head reminded me. “What’re you doing just standing in a corner? You need to get out there and sell your name and face. They need to know you’re the one who held this banquet.”

I sighed. I wasn’t really feeling up to socializing, but the whole reason I’d

spent all that money to improve the camp's food situation was so that the elves could publicize my actions and improve my reputation.

I braced myself and walked into the event area where the others were already waiting for me. As I drew closer, I noticed that Novem was looking curiously disheveled, and there was a weariness about her face. I had no time to dwell on it, though, since Sophia and Rachel reached out and grabbed onto my hands, dragging me onto the impromptu stage.

The elves and the courtesans rippled through the crowd, directing people to look over to where the three of us stood.

I took a deep breath and hardened my resolve, then forced a smile. "Good work, everyone!" I called, trying to project my voice. "Without your help, we wouldn't be able to keep fighting inside the dungeon! Please relax and enjoy the festivities. And for those of you who are on lookout duty, don't fret! We've set aside food and drink for you so you can participate once you're off shift. Now, let's all relax and have a great time!"

A cheer rose—no doubt it was the result of all the pent-up resentment they'd now finally be able to release.

Here and there, I could see some of the dungeon-going adventurers mocking me and sneering at my obvious attempt to gain popularity, but that didn't stop everyone else from having a good time.

All throughout the camp, people were scarfing down as much food as they could—food that had been cooked by the same chef they had previously disparaged. I could see the chef watching them all, a broad smile on his face. Meanwhile, the adventurers who'd been assigned to the expedition to fetch water and do odd jobs were acting like lords, relaxing as courtesans poured them drink after drink. Even the young children who looked after the horses were enjoying themselves—they grinned happily as they munched on sweets and drank down pints of juice.

I went ahead and climbed down off the stage, running into Eva as I did so. She had changed into her stage costume, which was shockingly different from her usual loose tunic. I had no idea where to rest my eyes—the costume's fabric clung tightly to every inch of her skin, revealing the lines of her body in vivid

detail. I flushed, studiously averting my eyes, but I'd already gotten a good glimpse of her shoulders, navel, and even her thighs.

"Thank you so much for providing me with a stage where I can sing my song!" Eva cried happily. "When I met you, I never could have known such a depressed adventurer would offer me something so magnificent. Truly, Lyle, I think we were drawn together by fate!"

All I could do was shrug. I didn't think our meeting was quite that big a deal.

"You've helped me out too," I murmured. "And anyway, I'm counting on you to keep the rumors flowing."

"Just leave it to me!" she said with a grin. "Stories are an elf's specialty."

Now that I think about it, elves are pretty talented at espionage, aren't they...? I mused. *I mean, they gather tons of information as they travel around, performing in various places, and they know how to spread rumors, and they're very quick on their feet...* I found myself feeling rather impressed. *I guess elves are pretty incredible.*

"More importantly," Eva said, embracing me from behind, "you need to start making some money in the dungeon now, Lyle. I hope you get back at least half of what you spent here."

"Aha ha. Aha...ha..." I couldn't even manage to look Eva in the face. That one was still way too far up in the air. "I'll do my best," I told her.

"Glad to hear it!" she chirped, "Now, take a listen to my song."

I waved a hand and turned to see her off, but froze as she climbed onto the stage. "I...I just saw under her skirt," I managed blankly.

"I believe those are the sorts of performing undergarments that are meant to be seen," the third head commented.

"Must be," the sixth head responded. "They certainly aren't very enticing."

I scowled. *Those two really know how to ruin the moment.*

The day after the banquet, I approached Hawkins a second time.

At the sight of me, he looked down at his breakfast with a sigh. The dish that lay in front of him was no meager plate of vegetables and beans—his bowl was filled to the brim with a rich, hearty meat stew. Freshly baked bread and a side dish were laid out to one side.

Quite the extravagant meal for a campsite, I thought with a grin. And even though he knows I'm the one who resolved the food situation, he can't call it a bribe—everyone else is getting served the same thing.

"You win, Lyle," Hawkins muttered. "You've left me with no other choice but to accept your generosity."

I beamed, sliding into the seat across from his.

Hawkins gave me a weary look. "Where did you learn to scheme like this?" he demanded. "I don't want to believe this is all Zelphy's doing."

Oh, it wasn't Zelphy, I thought. It was a handful of people far worse. I laughed a little to myself. Life would be so much easier if I could just say that out loud.

But alas, I could not, so I just ignored his question altogether. "Actually, Mister Hawkins, I have a request for you."

"I'll take care of it, as long as it's within my capabilities," he told me, face troubled. "And I'm reimbursing you for this food once we return to Darion."

I nodded. "I'd like you to tell the Guild to enforce their rules for the dungeon."

A flicker of relief came over Hawkins's face. "Well, if that's all you need...then I can agree to that."

"And one more thing," I added. "Santoire hates me, so I'd like to have my dungeon assignment taken care of in advance. In return, I promise to return to camp each day, and that I won't break any of the rules either."

Hawkins had to mull that one over a bit, but he ultimately agreed. "And that's all?" he asked warily.

"Yes," I agreed. "I think that's more than enough."

Hawkins looked at me with doubtful eyes.

What, does he think I'm hiding something...?

Getting that look from *Hawkins* of all people...it hit me right in the heart. “Seriously,” I mumbled. “That really is everything. I don’t plan to make any trouble.”

Hawkins sighed. “Well, in that case, Lyle, you’re the only adventurer I know who’d pay so much money to a sutler for nothing. Are you...sure you’re doing all right?”

Ah, perhaps he’s referring to the state of my wallet, I thought.

I nodded. “Yes, I’m doing fine. Most of that money came from Lord Bentler, anyway.”

Hawkins cradled his head in his hands. “You’ve gotten a lot more bold than you were that first time I met you,” he said, sighing. “I can’t tell if it’s for the better or worse.”

To think, I’ve only known Hawkins since I first registered as an adventurer.

It had only been a few months since then, but it felt like a lifetime had gone by.

We didn’t go back into the dungeon until our eighth day of the expedition. We’d spent the seventh day back at camp, perfecting the Arts we planned to put into practice today.

The subjugation was only projected to last for two weeks, I thought as I raced through the tree-lined walls of the dungeon, my party following at my heels. *We’re probably already bleeding into the second half of our time.*

It was a good thing, then, that we were headed to the dungeon’s midpoint—a place no other adventuring party had managed to reach yet.

As we dashed through the corridors using the fourth head’s Art, I used Map and Search to check our route in my head. I did the best I could to choose pathways that didn’t have monsters, so we could avoid unnecessary encounters along our way.

Eventually, we had to take a break—the dungeon was a vast place, and spanning it all in one mad dash was quite tiring.

“Th-That’s...certainly a fast...way to travel...” Rachel said, gasping for breath, “but I...I’m beat.” She was covered in sweat.

“We’ve gone a fair distance,” Rondo added, wiping his brow. “It’s amazing we haven’t run into any monsters yet.”

Ralph drove his spear into the ground as he scanned the area. “That’s not all,” he said with a grin. “Looks like we hit the jackpot here.”

He gestured to a spot on the wall that stuck out in an unnatural bulge. Something was wrapped in the branches—a treasure chest. Naturally, I had known about it before we entered the room.

“For some reason, the deeper you go into a dungeon, the more the contents of each treasure chest improve,” the second head explained in a confident tone. “There’s a theory that it’s a technique for luring humans deeper and deeper into a dungeon’s grasp until they reach their ultimate demise, but that has nothing to do with us. When it comes to your party, all it means is that we’re eating well tonight.”

Zelphy walked over to the chest, wrenching the branches open with her knife to show us how it was done. Once she was finished, I could see something metallic glistening within the opening.

“Well, let’s see...” Zelphy murmured. “There’s a ring—silver, with a large precious stone. There’s a few gold coins too... Actually, no, more than a few. I’d say there’s probably several dozen of them in here.”

Rondo’s party exchanged high fives while ours rejoiced. We’d only just found our first chest, and yet the outcome of our mission was already looking promising.

Sophia let out a deep, relieved sigh. “I’m so glad things are turning out so well. I was a little worried we’d come up empty-handed again.”

“Don’t be happy just yet,” Zelphy said, immediately putting a damper on our parade. “Are you forgetting how much money you’ve already wasted? You’re still at a deficit. A *huge* deficit!”

“Indeed we are,” the fourth head said from inside the Jewel. He let out an eerie little chuckle. “A terrible, horrible deficit, at that. But we can make it all

back now. We've reached an area that no other adventurer has before—that means easy money for us.”

Sounds good to me, I thought.

“Lyle, don't take more than forty to fifty percent of the chests here,” the second head instructed me. “You'll want to leave some of them for the others.”

The third head chuckled. “It'd be fun to sit back and watch the other parties fight among themselves over the rest of the chests,” he said, “but remember, time is of the essence. And if you're going to go collect those chests, you should start preparing for battle.”

I glanced at the map in my head. Red dots shifted around, representing the movements of the monsters in the dungeon.

If I take the shortest routes I can while keeping combat to a minimum...looks like we'll still have to fight around three times.

“All right, everyone,” I said, “we're going to be avoiding battle as much as possible, while prioritizing chest retrieval. You should be prepared to face enemies at least three times. How about we rest up a bit before we head out?”

“No complaints here,” Rachel said, collapsing on the spot. “All that running did a number on me.”

I glanced over at Sophia, who had a hatchet hanging at her hip. She'd had to forgo her battle-axe since we were going to be fighting in constricted corridors, but she'd apparently still opted to use a similar weapon.

She gave me a weighty look, like she had a lot to say but couldn't quite get the words out.

“What's wrong?” I asked her.

“I guess I'm just wondering...why now?” she asked. “You waited a long time before you finally decided to take action. Why not do something sooner?”

I flinched internally. It's not like I could just tell her, “Well, my ancestors were having fun watching us struggle.”

So I looked at Zelphy instead. “Well, it seemed like a certain someone was plotting something, so I thought I'd try and get a good gauge of their intentions

first...”

Zelphy didn't say a word. She just looked away guiltily.

Sophia leaned in closer to me. “So it's true?” she whispered in my ear. “There really is something going on? She's been so weirdly passive lately. It's not like her.”

“Perhaps Zelphy wanted your party to experience failure,” the third head guessed. “Bitter memories do tend to linger. I think we can put the failure off for another day, though. Experiencing the dungeon takes priority.”

Um, could we not? I thought. *And why does it sound like you want me to fail?*

“I think she was waiting for us to fail big time,” I whispered back to Sophia. “Some say that even failure can be a good experience.”

She nodded. “Oh, I see.”

When I looked back at Zelphy, her face was flushed bright red. “Shut up, why don't you?!” she demanded, pointing a quivering finger at me. “If you already know, then keeping quiet about it while I'm around is the kind thing to do!”

This statement provoked a round of commentary from the Jewel.

“Sorry, but it's our duty to tease the younger generation,” the second head said.

The third head chuckled. “You know, Zelphy really does have a cute side to her.”

“Your intentions were blatantly obvious,” the fourth head said with a sigh. “Try hiding them a bit better next time.”

The fifth head yawned. “Unfortunately, we're not kind people.”

“Why do I got to be kind to a girl who's not my type?” the sixth head demanded.

The seventh head rolled his eyes. “Just ignore what the sixth head said. But you *should* blame your own naivete for your failure. You should reconsider your strategy.”

My ancestors are quite strict on Zelphy, I thought.

Meanwhile, Rondo's party had started to laugh. I couldn't help but smile at how awkwardly she was acting, and shared a grin with Sophia.

Once everyone had settled back down, our break came to an end. We plunged back into the dungeon, back on the move.

"Wind Bullet!" Rachel cried, leaping around a sharp bend in the corridor and firing a blast of magic. Ralph stood in front of her, guarding her from harm.

The mass of air condensed by Rachel's spell hit an entire group of monsters, the sudden impact stunning them.

Ralph seized the opportunity to pounce, and the rest of us followed close behind.

"Out of my way!" Ralph snarled, waving his spear around. He managed to catch several goblins and insects in a single swing, sending them crashing to the ground.

Rondo sallied forth with his sword drawn after this show of brute force, Ralph dancing back behind him. Rondo's blade—which just happened to also be a Demonic Tool—was emitting a faint buzzing sound. Upon closer examination, it seemed to be engraved with an Art that would enhance the sharpness of the blade.

With Rondo's level of swordsmanship, he sliced through monster after monster with ease. I was shocked when he slid between two goblins, landing a killing blow on both along the way.

"That's quite an offense-based formation you have," Zelphy commented as she watched them. She seemed mildly impressed. "You must get injured often."

Rondo gave an embarrassed nod as he wiped the blood from his weapon. "You can tell?" he asked. "We've been going at it like this pretty much forever, so we don't really have any other patterns on hand."

"You're vulnerable to sneak attacks," the fifth head said with a sigh. "Go recruit some more people."

At this point, my party had tucked their weapons away and spread out to start

extracting the Demonic Stones and other materials from the dead monsters. I was the only one who stood unmoving, gripping my saber and staring farther down the corridor.

“There’s something else coming...” I said, voice serious. “Looks like we’re already going into battle number two, and this’ll be a big one.”

The monster appeared to be some sort of insect. The sight of it racing along the wall, its many legs churning as it ran forward, couldn’t have been more uncanny. Its multiple eyes gleamed as drool leaked from its mouth.

Ah, I thought with a shiver. It’s a spider. Must be around...ten feet in length...?

It was approaching us at a tremendous pace, so I ran out to meet it.

“Hey, Lyle,” I heard the second head say, “why don’t you try testing out my Art?”

I nodded, muttering its name.

“Field.”

My senses spread out wider and wider, until the spider’s movements felt as familiar as the back of my hand. I could feel that it was about to spew something from its mouth. I slid to a spot where the attack wouldn’t hit, using my saber to tear through as many of its legs as I could.



“Looks like three’s too much for me,” I said, shrugging as the spider turned to me in a rage. I’d taken out two of its legs as I slid by, forcing it to slide off the wall to the ground.

Rondo’s party had caught up by this point, and they quickly fell into formation behind the spider. The monster didn’t react, though. It seemed to have eyes only for me.

It rushed toward me, the vertical slit of its mouth opened wide in an attempt to intimidate its prey. Its missing legs caused its movements to be somewhat disjointed, though, and I was easily able to leap above its back and sink my blade through it in a downward stab.

My saber sank so deep it lodged into the earth, but the spider couldn’t slow its forward momentum. The speed of its charge tore its wound open wide, killing it almost instantly. The spider collapsed, falling still as its bodily fluids spilled all over the ground.

“You really are quite strong, Lyle,” the third head told me from inside the Jewel. He clapped his hands together in applause. “You’re usually so hopeless you’d never even begin to imagine it.”

My shoulders drooped. *Come on, I thought. Is it wrong of me to want some actual praise?*

Rachel’s knees buckled as she looked at the spider’s desecrated body. “Ugh, nasty!” she wailed.

“What’s the problem?” Ralph asked her, chuckling. “It’s just a big spider.”

“I’m no good with spiders! Rondo, *please*, could you collect the—?”

“I’ll do it,” Sophia said, stepping forward. “But what parts should I be collecting, exactly?”

Zelphy shrugged, then began to explain how to process the monster to Sophia.

I kept watch on our surroundings as I collected my saber from where it still stood, lodged into the ground. I wiped the spider’s fluids from the blade as I checked our route to the next chest, keeping an eye on the movements of both

monsters and adventurers as they shuffled around the dungeon.

It was evening when we finally made it out of the dungeon. We'd found a winding detour that led us most of the way back to the entrance, and allowed us to avoid not only monsters but other adventurers as well. Still, we were completely knackered by the time we stepped out of the arched entrance.

Despite how sweaty and exhausted we were, everyone's faces were bright and cheerful. The weight on our backs seemed to have finally lifted. It was true that we would be forced to sell the monster materials and Demonic Stones to the Guild at a discounted rate, and wouldn't make much from them, but the treasure chests... As the second head had said once before, they were the real deal.

"We did it, Lyle!" Ralph said, patting me on the shoulder. All his bitterness seemed to have washed away, suffocated under a tide of high spirits.

"Yeah, we really did," I agreed with a smile. "But before we do anything else, let's get some... Oh, wait. We'll have to bring the Demonic Stones and materials to the Guild before we can relax."

There was nothing else to be done—we headed straight to the Guild tent. Given what the Guild paid us for the Demonic Stones and the monster materials, they'd hardly even been worth our time to collect. Still, everyone accepted the prices with smiles and laughter. And once everything was sold, we returned to our own tent, where Novem and Aria awaited us.

We lined our earnings up along the table.

"Wait, this is... Just how much did you get?!" Aria demanded.

It was understandable that she was surprised—after all, most of the items were unmistakably valuable. There were rings, necklaces, and even some ingots of pure silver.

Our strangest find was a pair of large gauntlets. They were of rather intricate make, and came in a set meant to be worn on both hands.

"Milord, you did it," Novem said, staring down at the table in delight. "We will

certainly be able to make more than fifty coins for this, if we sell them in Darion.”

And we managed to get it all in a single day, I thought, pleased. I still don't know if we'll be able to make back all our investments, but with results like these, we can at least hope.

“I’m sorry, but...would it be possible for me to take the gauntlets as my share?” Rondo pleaded.

I looked him over. *They're kinda large for him,* I thought reluctantly.

“Please, Lyle, we’re begging you!” Rachel cried, putting her hands together as she entered her own plea. “That idiot’s been eyeing them down this whole time, and he doesn’t have any proper protective gear.”

“H-Hey!” Ralph burst out. “I n-never said anything about wanting those! You’ve got me all wrong!”

I picked up the gauntlets and inspected them.

“They don’t seem to be Demonic Tools, but they *are* well put together,” the second head said, thoughtfully. “They’d probably sell for a fair large sum. I mean, they’re ornamented nicely, and I’m sure there are quite a few people who’d want them.”

I glanced over at Novem and the other members of my party, making sure I had their permission, then turned back to Ralph.

“They’re not Demonic Tools,” I told him. “I can’t sense any mana from them either. But if you’re fine with that, they’re yours.”

Rondo smiled and turned to his spearman. “Isn’t that great, Ralph? You’re always talking about how you want armor.”

“S-Sorry.” Ralph bashfully scratched at his hair. “I’m not good with money, and I’m always breaking my spear, so I never had enough to get myself some armor. Thanks a bunch, Lyle.”

He pulled on the gauntlets with a childlike joy, like he was some kid who’d just gotten a fantastic birthday present. I couldn’t help but feel happy too, just watching him.

“They’re a close party,” Novem said, coming up next to me. “I’m sure they’ll be able to make a name for themselves.”

I nodded thoughtfully. *Still, their party currently specializes only in all-out offense. They could use a few more members to balance them out.*

“You’re right,” I agreed, laughing slightly. “We gotta be careful that we don’t fall behind ourselves.”

It feels so much less gloomy in here, I thought, looking at the smiles on everyone’s faces. *It’s like all the storm clouds have gotten blown away.*

That’s when I heard the voices of several children calling for us from outside our tent.

“Oh, here they are,” the second head said. “Lyle, you still have some of that candy, right?”

I stepped outside, only to find three small children waiting for me.

“Err, can I help you?” I asked, confused.

One of them stepped forward. It didn’t take much examining to notice he was the one with the most determined look in his eye. “U-Umm!” he stammered. “I heard some adventurers talking. One of them said the adventurers in this tent are getting cocky so he’s going to pay you a visit...”

I cocked my head at this, feeling very lost, but thankfully the fifth head stepped in to translate. “The kids saying that you’re standing out too much now that you’ve made such a blatant ploy to win over the camp,” he explained. “Some of the other adventurers have decided you’ve become an eyesore, so they’re going to pick a fight with you. I didn’t think you’d have to deal with any actual fighting; I thought they’d be more indirect about it. Seems I was wrong.”

“These adventurers are really not the brightest bunch...” the sixth head said, sighing. “How boring.”

I ducked back into the tent, quickly grabbing a bag of sweets and three copper coins. The sweets went to all three of the children, but I passed the coins straight to their leader.

“Thanks for the information,” I told him, “but you should be more careful next

time. Don't do anything crazy."

They left then, happy with their treats.

"What should we do...?" I muttered, pressing a hand to my brow. "Will they come today?"

I'd meant the words for my ancestors, but it was Zelphy who actually answered me.

"They'll aim to attack when the fewest people are around," she told me. "It's possible they're all talk, but I couldn't tell you for sure. Hopefully they're just messing around..." She sighed. "We decided Rachel's taking the day off tomorrow, right?"

I nodded. Magicians were valuable to have on the team, so Novem and Rachel had been taking breaks on rotation.

"All right then," Zelphy said firmly. "Ralph'll be good to scare 'em off, and I'd like Rondo to stay and help too. All three of you can have the day off from the dungeon. I'll stay here with you." She turned back to me. "Lyle, tomorrow you'll be heading to the dungeon with just your party with you."

Half of us are sitting out? I thought nervously. *Though I guess it's for the best if Zelphy stays behind...*

It wasn't like I could sit out of dungeon duty—using my Arts was the only way we'd be able to efficiently make money.

As I dwelled on this thought, Zelphy started pulling her armor on again. Once dressed, she grabbed her weapons and pushed her way out of the tent.

"Where are you going?" I called after her.

"The bar," she replied, voice curt.

And with those two words, she disappeared into the dimming lights of the camp.

As Zelphy drew closer to Old Byron's bar, she could hear the angry voices of other adventurers.

“Damn that womanizing rookie!” cried one.

“I hear he went crying to that blasted Hawkins!” lamented another.

“I can’t believe he threw around all that money just to suck up to everyone,” snarled a third. “He pisses me off.”

Just as I thought, Zelphy mused. This is where they’ve all been gathering to seethe over what Lyle’s been up to.

The morning of the previous day, Hawkins had gathered all the dungeon-going adventurers together and given them a stern warning to follow the rules. It seemed to have proved effective, but rumors had quickly begun to spread. People posited that the only reason Hawkins had chided them was because of a request from Lyle, which had naturally made the boy the main target of the adventurers’ ire. And once they’d realized how popular Lyle had gotten around camp, their frustration had only continued to grow.

Zelphy strode into the area where all the adventurers were sitting, and they all fell silent. They gave each other rattled looks before lowering their heads in respect. They were all adventurers from Darion after all—they all knew the face of a veteran like Zelphy.

“What brings you here, ma’am?” one of the adventurers asked.

Zelphy thunked into a seat, ordering herself a drink before she deigned to answer the question. “I came to drink,” she drawled. “But I figure I can also hammer a point home while I’m at it.”

The barkeep slid her flagon of ale across the bar, and Zelphy chugged it down right then and there. She dragged contemptuous eyes over the frozen adventurers before her.

“Who’s the idiot who said my newbies were getting cocky, hmm?” she demanded. “Now, correct me if I’m wrong, but I’m pretty sure that means *I’m* getting cocky too.”

The bar was dead silent. It seemed to hit them all that Zelphy, who had a more prestigious adventurer career than anyone else present, was the one instructing Lyle.

“Th-That’s not what we meant,” one of the adventurers stammered. “We just...”

Zelphy raised a brow. “You just?” she demanded. “Just what? Do go on.”

Just as the intimidating air Zelphy was exuding reached a fever pitch, Darrel strode in. He looked refreshed. He was wearing shorts and a towel he’d slung over his shoulder; he’d clearly just finished up a round in the baths.

If you judged Darrel by appearances alone, all you’d see was your average, middle-aged man. But the reality was, he’d been in the adventuring trade even longer than Zelphy had.

“Man, an outdoor bath’s as refreshing as ever,” he said grinning. “The only problem is, I gotta be seen naked...by *dudes*.” He cackled, and Zelphy covered her face.

“Darrel, could you pipe down a second?” she snapped.

The older man grabbed a seat beside Zelphy, saying casually, “This isn’t that big a deal, you know.” He nudged her with an elbow. “We’ve been keeping quiet this whole time, watching things play out on their own. Are you really going to panic and start warning these guys off just because they picked a fight? That’s not very fair of you.”

Zelphy stared at Darrel in silence as he leaned over the bar. “Ah, barkeep! Could you get me a cup too?”

Once his drink was in hand, he turned to the rest of the adventurers in the bar. “You guys should be able to grasp the situation around here a bit better now, I hope. You should be more mindful of the way you act—you shouldn’t threaten people or make it harder for them to do their jobs. Now if you pick a fight with the Womanizer, the whole camp will turn on you.”

Darrel chuckled as he spoke, but the adventurers’ faces were all turning pale.

“By the way, as it turns out, I’m leading some newbies myself. They’re promising, but they’ve been feeling strangely paranoid about their surroundings. They’ve become so *generous* I can’t bear to look at them. Can one of you go put in a good word for them?”

The adventurers who took food and drink from Rex's party turned away, their faces blanched.

"Now then, let's drink! And, uh, Zelphy, my girl...I get why you'd put on your equipment to intimidate them, but you should really take a bath. You kinda reek."

"Oh, shut it, gramps!"

Zelphy narrowed her eyes at the older man, but found she wasn't too angry. She'd intended to give all those adventurers a stern warning, but Darrel's casual threats had more than gotten the job done.

Chapter 38: A Steady Advance

The next day, Aria, Sophia, Novem, and I headed into the dungeon together. We made steady progress, eventually arriving at a conspicuously large room containing a fairly large number of monsters. Luckily, we'd managed to keep the element of surprise, which gave us an advantage in battle.

I watched as Aria activated her Art, shooting forward at an incredible speed. She circled around a gaggle of monsters, snarling, "Got you!" as she sunk her spear into an orc's chest. She made full use of her explosive acceleration, harnessing its force to drive her blade home.

That was all it took—the orc collapsed, dead in a single strike.

Sophia darted out onto the battlefield soon after. She lifted one of the multiple hatchets she'd brought with her, using her Art to lighten it before sending it flying. Once the hatchet left her hand, she released her Art, allowing the weapon to regain its original weight even as it maintained its prior speed. Ultimately, this weight manipulation technique resulted in the hatchet colliding with a goblin's head, the blade sinking deep into its skull.

"Take that!" she cried triumphantly.

"Those girls are looking...quite robust," the third head commented. He sounded almost disappointed.

It was Novem's turn next. She brandished her silver staff—an heirloom she'd received from her family before she'd set out traveling with me.

"Wind Cannon!" she cried, invoking her magic. Her spell spun forward, shooting toward the monsters. The insect monsters which had taken to the air fell to the ground dead, their bodies torn apart and their wings shredded.

The only monster that remained was the massive bug I stood in front of. It towered over me, scythe-like appendages outstretched.

That thing must be nearly seven feet tall, I thought, reaching out to grasp a saber in each hand.

“What’s this one called again?” I asked idly.

“A green mantis, milord,” Novem replied.

I nodded, then focused entirely on my opponent when it swept forward, scythe-like arms slicing at me from both sides.

I diverted both blows with a careful angle of my sabers, sending the monster’s arms careening out of the way. I took advantage of the opening without a second thought, diving forward into a roll that took me under the green mantis’s body.

I sliced my sabers at the monster’s legs, then took aim at the lower part of its torso—I assumed its exoskeleton would be the weakest there.

My foe let out what sounded like a scream as I stood and drove both my blades straight through its stomach. It turned toward me, but Sophia got in a sweep from her battle-axe from behind—splitting the mantis’s body in two.

I took a quick scan of my surroundings, keeping on my toes in case there were more monsters to fight. It seemed the green mantis had truly been the last, though—all the others were dead. I couldn’t sense any more danger through my Arts either.

I relaxed, sticking my sabers into the ground and giving the green mantis’s body a once-over.

“Hmm, this is troubling,” I mumbled to myself. “Zelphy never told us what parts of this one were sellable.”

“Those scythes sold pretty well in my time,” the second head chimed in immediately. “And the mantis’s Demonic Stone fetched a good price too, of course. It should be located somewhere inside the monster’s abdomen.”

I stared down at the monster for a moment, pretending like I was deep in thought. “Let’s take its scythes and its Demonic Stone, once we figure out where it is. We’ll have to check with Zelphy when we get back so we know how to do it right the next time.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Aria said, nodding. “But you know...the deeper we go, the more unfamiliar monsters we’re gonna find lurking around, aren’t we?”

What a pain, I thought, sighing.

I went ahead and tasked the rest of my party with collecting materials and Demonic Stones from the rest of the monsters we'd slain, taking the task of searching for chests myself. I walked over to one of the room's walls, scanning it as I drifted closer. I located the chests with little difficulty—my Arts had already given me a general idea of their locations.

"It's kinda overkill to have three chests in one room, isn't it?" I asked my ancestors, lowering my voice to a whisper so Novem and the others wouldn't overhear.

I reached forward and pried the first one open, taking care not to damage the contents as I did so. When I peered inside, I was greeted with the sight of a wallet full of gold and silver coins.

"Yep, that should cover us," I said with a grin.

"You won't even have to make the effort of liquidating it!" the fourth head rejoiced. "Cold, hard cash has its perks."

The sixth head was less than impressed. "Coins just don't give you that, you know, *illusive* feeling you want when you pop open a treasure chest. When it comes to dungeon loot, it's the items you really want. I mean, don't you love the anticipation of seeing just how high you can sell each one for?"

I made a face. *Yeah, I've gotta admit that I don't really get where he's coming from on this one*, I thought. *I guess I'll have to take the fourth head's side on this* —

"Well, sure, that's fun in its own way," the fourth head shot back, "but...don't you just want to count all those coins one by one and tuck them away safe and sound in a nice, locked safe?"

Nope, sorry, I thought. *You've both lost me*.

I moved on to the second chest, which contained a gold nugget. I could tell it wasn't of the rarium variety because it didn't give off any mana, but didn't find myself too disappointed—gold was still gold. The mere sight of it was enough to send the fourth head into paroxysms of joy.

Last but not least came the third chest—I wrenched it open, finding a large pea-green gemstone inside. There was a luster to its surface that I struggled to put into words. I pulled it out of the wall, a curious feeling coming over me as it nestled comfortably into the palm of my hand.

This gemstone...it's different, somehow, from any other I've seen before... But, no, wait... I feel like I just saw some that were similar...



I narrowed my eyes at the gemstone, thinking hard, but lost focus when the seventh head started talking. “I knew it!” he exclaimed excitedly. “Lyle’s one lucky devil! A Mana Crystal this big is a rare find.”

“It’s a Mana Crystal...?” I asked. “I’m pretty sure that’s what they use to power Demonic Tools.”

Ah, that’s where I saw a gemstone like this before, I thought. The adventurers from Central had Mana Crystals embedded in their tools.

I glanced back down at the beautiful, greenish-yellow gemstone resting in my hand. The more I looked at it, the more I felt like I’d be sucked into its pear-shaped depths.

“Peridot, I’d say,” the fifth head chimed in. “That’s an uncommon find.”

The seventh head did say something about Mana Crystals being outrageously expensive...

I decided to stuff it into a different bag than the rest of our treasure, so I could keep it doubly safe for the time being. Once it was secure, I turned to inform the others about what I’d found, but the confused looks on their faces brought me to a standstill.

I followed their line of sight, curious as to what they were gawking at, then gasped in shock. Duranta flowers now poured through the seams of the dungeon’s woven-tree walls, filling the gaps full to bursting.

“Huh?!”

I stared blankly at the walls for a moment, then shook myself to clear my mind. *Right, I was going to ask Sophia what duranta meant in the language of flowers.*

“Hey, Sophia,” I said, trying to get her attention, “didn’t you say you knew what duranta meant in the language of flowers?”

My voice seemed to break whatever enchantment the flowers had cast over her, snapping her to her senses. “Wha—? Oh, yes! It means, um...acceptance... Like you’re giving someone a warm welcome.” Her cheeks flushed, and she cast her eyes down at the floor.

No wonder she was so happy to accept that duranta flower I offered her, I thought.

I watched her for a moment—only a few seconds had gone by when her eyes began to drift back up from the ground, returning to the märchen-esque forest clearing the dungeon room had transformed into.

“It’s so pretty here,” she said softly, staring at the flowers as if spellbound. “All these indigo flowers, lit up by the warm light pouring down from overhead... I feel like I’m dreaming.”

None of us thought much more of the room’s transformation—sometimes, strange things just happen—so we sat down and rested there for a while. Before long, though, we were back on the move.

Novem stared impassively across the inside of their party’s tent, her mind busy reliving what had happened in the dungeon earlier that day. The four of them had managed to return to their campsite without any real incident, but her mind was stuck on what had happened in the room where Lyle had fought the green mantis. *All those duranta flowers blooming at the same time...*

Her musings were interrupted, however, when Lyle cried out, “Oh, snap! I forgot to tell you guys!”

He snatched up his pack, rummaging through it in a panic. A hint of a smile came over Novem’s face as she watched him. She found the sight of him in such a state rather charming, if in a childish way.

Novem climbed to her feet, drifting over to him with a fond look on her face.

Milord, you really are such a—

A gemstone tumbled onto the table. Novem stared at it in shock, her eyes dialing wide.

Why does he...?

Everyone else in the tent was staring at the gemstone with similarly thunderstruck expressions—albeit for some very different reasons. No one thought anything strange of the aghast look on Novem’s face.

“That’s one huge-ass jewel!” Ralph screeched, prompting Zelphy to thunk a fist into the top of his head.

“Don’t make a fuss, you idiot,” Zelphy snarled. “What are you gonna do if someone else hears?” She gave him a nasty glare before turning back to Lyle. “Still...that’s definitely a Mana Crystal. You really pulled yourself a winning ticket, Lyle. Even if all you sell is that gem, it’ll more than make up for all your expenses.”

Lyle immediately began to rejoice, a sight which Novem watched happily. But she couldn’t help taking frequent glances at the gemstone lying on the table.

“So, umm, there was this room where flowers started blooming out of nowhere—I found the Mana Crystal there. I guess I kinda hit the jackpot, huh?”

“Wait, that’s where you got it?!” Aria cried. “Why didn’t you say something?!”

“I k-kinda got lost in the moment,” Lyle stammered, flustered by how rapidly Aria was closing in on him. “I m-mean, I’m sorry!”

Novem’s head drooped as she stared moodily at the floor. *A peridot just happening to appear in that room...and all that duranta blooming...? There’s no way that was a coincidence.*

“Come to think of it,” Sophia chimed in, “a duranta flower grew out of the wall near us on our first day in the dungeon too.”

Novem lifted her head, shooting the other girl a dubious look. *But why would it show up then...? I didn’t even go into the dungeon that day...*

Sophia’s words prompted Lyle to think over what had happened on their first day in the dungeon, then try to explain the course of events to everyone else as best as he could. Aria stared enviously at Sophia as he explained how he’d gifted the duranta flower to her, but Novem was more concerned with the part where the flower had grown out of the wall without anyone noticing. It seemed like a minor thing, but Novem could glean quite a lot from the occurrence.

After Lyle had finished his story, everyone went back to rejoicing over their good fortune. They all smiled and laughed together for a while, until eventually Sophia excused herself and left the tent, stating she had other business to attend to.

Novem immediately followed her, waiting until they were a good distance from the others before she called out, “Miss Sophia?”

Sophia glanced over her shoulder, a cheerful look on her face. “Yes? Oh, Novem, it’s you. Did you need something?”

She looks happy, Novem mused. Come to think of it, she’s been acting more at ease ever since the first day our party went into the dungeon. Novem thought of Lyle’s story, and how he’d given Sophia the duranta flower. *Ah, I see. So that’s why.*

Novem tucked this revelation away for the time being, launching into a line of questioning that revolved around what had happened in the dungeon the day the duranta had bloomed. Sophia answered everything she asked without question, though a faint blush lingered on her cheeks the entire time.

Once they both fell silent, Sophia carefully pulled out the duranta flower Lyle had given her, which she’d kept tucked in the middle of a folded piece of paper.

“I thought maybe I could press it and preserve it,” she explained to Novem, “so I decided to keep it. When Lyle gave it to me, it felt like he was welcoming me into the party. I knew he didn’t mean it that way, but I couldn’t stop smiling all the same.”

Novem nodded. *So even though she knows she’s willfully misinterpreting Lyle’s actions, she’s still happy he gave it to her.*

The thought prompted Novem to reach forward and pull the flower from Sophia’s fingers. She sandwiched it between her hands, then invoked her magic.

“U-Umm, Novem...!” Sophia cried out, desperately trying to get her to stop what she was doing.

She must think I’m trying to burn the flower to a crisp, Novem thought idly. *I guess it’s relatively understandable—there’s smoke coming off of it, after all.*

Sophia watched, aghast, as a plume of smoke drifted up from between Novem’s fingers. But when Novem opened her hand, Sophia relaxed—the duranta flower was unharmed. In fact, it had been immaculately dried and pressed.

“I don’t do this for just anyone,” Novem told her firmly. “You should have some more confidence in yourself—I’ve welcomed you from the very start, and I’m sure Lord Lyle feels the same way. I’m sure Aria accepts you too.”

“Th-Thank you,” Sophia said, eyes a bit teary as she accepted the pressed flower from Novem.

Novem smiled at her. “Duranta actually has one more meaning, you know. It can mean, ‘I’m watching over you’ too.”

Sophia’s face went bright red. She stood there, frozen, pondering the new meaning of her gift, as Novem turned and left.

Novem continued moving until she could no longer make out Sophia’s face, then let her own expression fall to blankness. *Duranta means “I’m watching you,” and the peridot...*

She put the two events together and muttered, “Octō, you...”

The rest, she didn’t say aloud.

Back in the SwordWings’ tent, Rex was fuming.

“Goddammit!” he snarled.

It wasn’t as if his party wasn’t making money—they were. The farther they made it into the dungeon, the more their profit grew. There was just one problem.

“How’s that kid’s party making so much money?”

Those first few days, it had been obvious Lyle’s party was floundering. They’d been trying their best, but had failed to make any significant money nonetheless. Then, on the sixth day, Lyle’s party had decided to host a banquet to show the support team their appreciation for their hard work.

Rex had mocked the decision at first, but with each passing day, Lyle’s advantage over his party grew clearer and clearer. Lyle’s party was always served first at meals, and Santoire had gotten chastised for using her personal grudges as an excuse to delay handing out their dungeon assignments. Perhaps as compensation for Santoire’s behavior, Lyle’s party was now considered the

exception to some rules, and was given priority placement.

Rex sighed harshly. *No matter what I do, everyone seems to be on Lyle's side. And there's no telling who's watching or listening.*

"We're gonna lose at this rate," Rex said aloud, turning to Darrel. The older man didn't seem much concerned over whether the SwordWings won or lost. "Sir, what should I do?"

Darrel had been anticipating this plea for help, and had an answer waiting at the ready. "You need to think for yourself," he pointed out. "Your instructional period is already over. From here on out, you'll have to make a living on your own."

Rex's fists clenched, his head hanging forward miserably. *Like hell I'll lose to that kid. Just how hard does Darrel think we've worked to get this far?*

The other SwordWings called out to him, trying to calm him down, but Rex was too far gone. None of their voices could reach him.

The evening of our tenth day in the dungeon fell without further incident. According to the Guild, the dungeon subjugation as a whole was progressing smoothly. We'd heard tell that it wouldn't be much longer before someone discovered the dungeon's innermost chamber.

We were doing pretty well in the money department at this point, largely thanks to my discovery of the Mana Crystal. But even though we'd made up for our losses on the expedition so far, we hadn't made ourselves much of a profit yet.

Once evening had shifted into night, I decided I'd sit down and get an understanding of the actual numbers. I began balancing our books, making sure to list all the equipment we'd gone through and the reward we'd have to pay Rondo's party in return for their help.

Just how much are we going to be left with...? I wondered, squinting at the paper in front of me. I'd recorded everything just as the fourth head had taught me to, even though it hurt me deeply to look at all the huge amounts I'd had to subtract from our total earnings.

“Old Byron, that weasel,” I muttered. “I know he said he’d buy all the cooking utensils we’d need, but a bread-baking pot definitely doesn’t count.”

Although I have to admit, that pot’s the only reason we’re able to enjoy freshly baked bread.

The fourth head chuckled. “Well, that’s a merchant for you. Anyways, don’t worry too much over what you’ve got in the ledger, Lyle—you haven’t sold all of your treasure yet. I’m sure you’ve got a decent profit going, and even if you don’t, I’ll make sure you make money no matter what!”

“Lyle’s going to be the one selling things, though,” the fifth head pointed out to his father. “Good luck making a profit with his skills.”

“Maybe we should have picked up more chests if we’re still running on such a tight margin...” I thought aloud.

“Gotta contradict you on that one, Lyle,” the second head refuted. “If you took more chests, then you’d be the only one making any money. It’d make you stand out again, and not in a good way. You wouldn’t be able to get a good night’s sleep after that—you’d be lying awake, worrying over what some idiot might decide to do.”

So even though it’s possible to make more money, I shouldn’t, because making too much money would cause me problems...? I mused. *Sounds surprisingly difficult to adjust for.*

“So that’s how things work?” I asked.

“It most certainly is. Take it from us.”

I nodded, then turned my eyes to my two sabers, which lay in one of the corners of the tent. They’d both been damaged beyond use.

Two down, two spares left to go, I thought.

“On a different topic,” I said lightly, “I really need to change something up when it comes to my weapons.”

“Perhaps you should buy something higher quality,” the second head advised.

My eyebrows rose. *It’s rare for him not to recommend swapping to his weapon of choice.*

“Your life in Darion is coming to an end,” the second head continued. “If you go to Central, you could probably buy some good weapons there.”

Our life in Darion is coming to an end, I repeated silently. The words had a sad ring to them, and a hint of melancholy fell over me. *That means we’re going to have to say goodbye to Zelphy, and Hawkins, and Rondo’s party. We’ll have to say goodbye to everyone we met there.*

“Feeling lonely, Lyle?” the third head asked. “Whenever that feeling comes over you, just try and think of all the people that you’re going to meet in the future. You’ll be just like that elven girl, Eva—always meeting new people as you travel from place to place, but always having to say goodbye to them as well.”

“That’s...” I sighed, some of the tension leaking out of me. “That’s true.”

“And remember,” the third head went on, “it’s not like you’re parting with them forever. It looks like you’ll even have Aria and Sophia tagging along with you, so you don’t have to be so down. You’ll have no reason to feel lonely.”

There was something curious about the way he phrased that, I thought, but I didn’t get the chance to ask him about it. Novem had entered the tent, her eyes going straight to me.

“Lord Lyle, it seems like Hawkins is going to temporarily return to Darion,” she informed me. “However, if we talk to another Guild staff member, they will do the paperwork in his place.”

“Hawkins is going back?” I asked, baffled. “Why? Isn’t he supposed to be the person in charge here?”

“If you want my thoughts on the matter,” Novem began, then paused. She seemed to be struggling to find the right words. “I believe the Guild is running short on hands, and they don’t have any other staff members available whom they’d trust to transport the Demonic Stones and monster materials back to Darion. I highly doubt Miss Santoire would be willing to take on such a responsibility.”

I nodded, understanding immediately. From what I’d observed, the Demonic Stones and monster materials we gathered at the dungeon were being carted

back to Darion at regular intervals. It was a perilous job—it was possible the supply train would be attacked during its journey, and even allied adventurers were liable to snatch up some of the more valuable cargo. It was vital for the Guild to choose a responsible party to put in charge.

“Hawkins has it rough,” the sixth head drawled. “Santoire’s a total deadweight.”

Dang, I thought. Harsh.

I went to reply to Novem, then just watched as she shuffled her feet in a fit of uncharacteristic nervousness.

She seems like she wants to tell me something, I thought, glancing around. We were the only ones left in the tent at the moment.

“I-Is...” I paused.

The fourth head theatrically cleared his throat, urging me on.

“Is there something you wanted to talk about?” I finally managed.

“Not really,” she said slowly. “It’s nothing too important, but...I was just wondering...do you ever feel like you’re being watched while you’re in the dungeon, milord?”

I cocked my head. *I mean, I’m checking my surroundings with Arts, so there’s no reason for me to feel that way,* I thought. *I’d sense them if they were there. But, now that she mentions it...there are times when I get a strange feeling, like something’s off. I’m sure I’m just imagining it, though.*

I shook my head, focusing back on Novem. “No, I don’t think I’ve ever felt like that,” I told her.

Novem smiled at my answer. “I see. Then that’s good. Goodnight, milord.”

When she left the tent, I thought she looked a bit relieved.

“I wonder which party’s going to treat me to dinner today?” Santoire mused idly as the evening of the Guild’s twelfth day at the dungeon descended into night. She was feeling quite at peace now that Hawkins was no longer around to

nag her.

One of the other Guild staff shot Santoire a critical look, but she knew they were too weak-willed to actually do anything about her actions. She paid them no heed as she bunched up all the papers on her desk and stuffed them into a file.

The same staff member who'd shot her the critical look gave a deep sigh. "Please check over those papers properly, Santoire."

Santoire rolled her eyes. *Tsk, what's your problem? You're just a lowly staff worker*, she thought snarkily.

Outwardly, though, she played it innocent. "Oh, I totally forgot!" she trilled. "Let me get right to that!" She spread the papers back out on the table, like she was about to dive back into work.

The Guild staff member just left the tent—he still had work to do, and managing Santoire wasn't one of his assignments. He wasn't the only member of the Guild personnel that found themselves frustrated with Santoire. The receptionist seemed to regularly find herself with less work than her colleagues, much to their ire.

Santoire narrowed her eyes, still staring down at the papers in front of her. "That noisy little..."

She was cut off by an adventurer entering the tent. He was a friendly sort, and drifted over to her as soon as he spotted her.

"Hey, Santoire," he said cheerfully. "We're gonna host a little banquet. Do you want to join in?"

She looked the man up and down. *Well, it's not like there are many decent adventurers here anyway*, she thought, still irritated. *I'll guess I can put up with his lot*.

"Okay!" Santoire said, pressing her hands to her chest and giving him a big smile. "I'll go, I'll go!"

She kept up the cutesy gestures as she followed the adventurer out of the tent, leaving the papers on her desk abandoned.

Little did she know, one of those papers contained a detailed plan of the SwordWings activities for the day. It was already long past the time when they were supposed to return, but not a soul had seen them come back to camp...

“Is anyone here?!” Darrel roared, bursting into the Guild tent. “Hawkins?!” He looked jerkily around the tent, then swore. “Right, he’s in Darion. Is anyone *else* here?!”

No one replied, and Darrel’s eyes fell on the papers still strewn about the reception desk. The sun was setting and the light within the tent was dim, but he still took it upon himself to flip through them. After squinting through a few pages, his eyes fell on schedule that indicated that the SwordWings should have returned much earlier that day.

“What are they *doing*...?!” Darrel muttered, concern and irritation mixing on his face. “And of course it just *had* to be on the day I took off...” All of a sudden he jerked up, whirling around to face the bulletin board. “Their Guild cards!”

Guild cards were always made in pairs, with the Guild keeping one and the adventurer keeping the other. They had several peculiar characteristics—one of them being that if an adventurer died with their card on their person, the Guild’s version would be permanently marred, their name scratched out.

For the dungeon expedition, the Guild had plastered all of the adventurers’ Guild cards to a bulletin board in the reception tent. Darrel scanned it hurriedly, relaxing when he saw that none of the SwordWings had strikes through their names.

“Good,” he said, letting out a sigh of relief. “They’re alive, at least. But in that case...they either got stuck somewhere and can’t safely get back to camp, or they got impatient and pushed into an area beyond their limits.”

Goddamit, Darrel thought, tearing back out of the tent. *Of course Hawkins is missing at a time like this. I’ll just have to go get them myself. But I’ll need someone to help...* Zelphy’s face popped into his mind.

He made his way back to his own tent, snatched up his equipment, and hurried over to the tent Lyle’s party was staying in. Unfortunately, when he

went inside, he only found Rachel and Ralph waiting for him.

“Hey, is Zelphy back yet?” Darrel asked, voice panicked.

Rachel and Ralph eyed him, taking in the fact he was fully armed.

“Sh-She said she wanted to teach the party the proper way to camp out in a dungeon, so none of them are coming back tonight. She said she wanted to do it because the innermost chamber is going to be found soon. I th-think they’ll be back sometime tomorrow morning.”

“Got it,” Darrel said, nodding. “If she gets back, tell her a middle-aged man called Darrel was looking for her. I think she’ll get the message!”

He was off before Rachel could reply.

I’ll find them, no matter what it takes, Darrel thought, hurrying toward the dungeon. *I swear I will.*

He reached the dungeon’s entrance not too long after. There were some adventurers he knew hanging around nearby, so Darrel jogged over to them and asked if he could use their map.

“Zelphy’s in the dungeon, so I can’t reach her,” he explained, “but I’m pretty sure my party’s exploring this area right here. I feel bad asking, but could you help me find them?”

One of the adventurers nodded, caving to his plea. “Got it,” he said. “We’ve gotta help each other out in times like this. But Darrel...boss...it’s already night, and we don’t got too many people to work with. We’re pretty limited in the amount of ground we can cover.”

Darrel stared hard at the map. “I know,” he said quietly. “But I have to find them.”

“D-Don’t push yourself too hard,” a nervous adventurer chimed in. “Let me see who else I can get on board.”

Darrel nodded, eyes distant. “Sorry for the trouble. I hope I’m just overreacting.”

A heavy sense of responsibility settled on Darrel’s shoulders. *I screwed up,* he thought miserably. *I made light of how impatient they really were... This is all*

my fault.

He waited impatiently until they'd gathered all the adventurers they could for the searching party, then led his team into the dungeon.

The SwordWings huddled together in the dungeon, their surroundings lit only by a single lantern clasped in their supporter's hand. The dungeon's natural light had faded some time ago, leaving them engulfed in darkness.

At this point, they'd fought quite a few monsters, but the sight before them was impressive enough to drive all thoughts of that away.

An archway made of twisted trees loomed before them, lit by flickers of lantern light. Rex stared at it, overwhelmed with excitement—there could be only one reason for such a structure to exist inside of a dungeon.

"Hey," one of the SwordWings said softly. "That's the innermost chamber, isn't it?"

One by one, the faces of the SwordWings' party members lit with joy. The group erupted into cheers.

Their initial plan had been to just scrounge up as much money as they could over the last few days of the subjugation, but now they'd managed to stumble on the entrance to the innermost chamber as well—down a dark corridor, no less.

"Whoever locates the chamber gets a cut of the treasure inside, right?!" demanded a SwordWing. "We're rich!"

"I'm certainly not going to wait to pick over someone else's leftovers!" Rex shouted. "We've come so far, and we're the only ones here... All we have to do is conquer that room, and the treasure will be all ours!"

Rex's fellow SwordWings exchanged looks.

"That idea's reckless, no matter how you look at it," said one. "We should head back to camp for now."

"That's right," said another. "We're way past our return time. They might put a search party together if we take any longer."

“Those search parties come with a fine, don’t they?” said a third. “Hey, Rex, we should turn back.”

Rex paused for a moment, taking this suggestion into consideration, but he just couldn’t get past all the images of Lyle flashing through his head. “Let’s survey the inside at least,” Rex said finally. “It’d be best if we returned to camp with a bit of intel, right?”

We’ve got nine members today, since we left Darrel behind, Rex thought, but you don’t come across opportunities like this every day. If we give up now, that Womanizer guy’s party is going to beat us.

The SwordWings’ scouts weren’t pleased with the risk, but they still begrudgingly poked their heads through the archway, peering into the dungeon’s innermost chamber. For some reason, though, they looked quite perplexed when they pulled back.

“What’s wrong?” Rex demanded.

The scouts ignored him, one borrowing the supporter’s lantern while the other stepped through the archway and inspected the walls and ceiling of the chamber beyond. He didn’t linger long, though—he stepped back out, sending his fellow scout a strange look. They exchanged looks, cocking their heads curiously at one another.

“Don’t leave me in the dark!” Rex burst out, quickly losing patience. “What did you see?”

“Nothing,” the scouts explained. “It’s not there.”

“Huh...?”

“The monster isn’t there, Rex, I’m telling you. Didn’t see hide nor hair of it.”

Rex pressed a hand against his mouth as he considered the possibilities. *Could the monster be invisible?! I’ve heard of a chameleon monster who has a trait like that...but that monster’s at a level we could handle. Does that mean we could have a chance of beating the boss...?*

Rex turned to their magician. “Hey, could you check the area with magic? There’s a chance it’s an invisible monster.”

The SwordWings' magician stepped forward, pointing his staff at the archway and invoking his magic.

Rex watched as a storm burst to life in the boss room and water began pouring down from the ceiling, hoping that some of the droplets would bounce off of an unseen foe. But when the water conjured by the spell stopped falling, he was left just as baffled as before. If there was a monster inside that room, it wasn't making a peep.

"There's nothing here," one of the scouts said again.

Rex's party exchanged looks.

"You gotta be kidding me," one of them muttered.

"I mean, what sort of dungeon *is this?!'*" a second moaned.

A third wrinkled their brow. "I could swear I heard that the innermost chamber always has a strong monster in it..."

As his comrades expressed their opinions, Rex mustered up his resolve. Once he felt ready, he dashed through the archway and into the chamber, ignoring his comrades' calls to stop.

He ran to the center of the room, then stood there a moment, his weapon at the ready. But he felt nothing.

The monster was nowhere to be found.

"It really isn't here," Rex said softly, confused.

A relieved string of SwordWings entered the room after him, many of them eyeing the luxurious chest that was resting in the back of the room.

Surely, they thought, that chest is what we've been waiting for.

"D-Don't scare me like that," one of the SwordWings told Rex, laughing nervously.

"Hey," another one chimed in, "maybe the monster's the type that wanders around? It could have left the room."

A third nodded. "Come to think of it, that huge lizard we met on the way here was pretty formidable..."

They all timidly approached the chest, crowding around it in a circle.

This feels a bit...anticlimactic, Rex thought.

Still, his expectations for the treasure the chest contained were growing and growing. “This dungeon’s been a pretty profitable place so far. The treasure in the innermost chamber has got to be something similarly impressive.”

Rex reached out and ran his fingers over the chest’s surface, but froze when Darrel’s voice came booming out from behind him.

“Don’t touch it!” the older man yelled.

But it was too late—trees shot up from the entranceway of the chamber, sealing in Rex, his team, and a winded Darrel, who’d just barely managed to make it into the room. The adventurers who’d been trailing behind him were forced to skid to a stop, unable to pass the tree barrier.

Rex stared at Darrel and the trees in shock. “...Huh?”

But the trees were the least of his worries—the chest in front of him crumbled to dust, and the ground began to shake.

“SwordWings, on your guard!” Darrel called, holding his spear up high. “That was a trap!” He shook his head, muttering, “Dammit, I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

Something shifted under Darrel’s feet, and he immediately shifted from the spot. Moments later, a creature emerged from the ground—it was a wriggling thing, with a large, gaping mouth. Its black body was mottled with white speckles.

The SwordWings stared at the monster in horror. It had no eyes, no ears...just a round mouth lined with rings upon rings of sharp teeth. This was not a monster that chewed its food—when devouring something, its teeth rings spun in circles, shredding prey to bits even as each spiral drew their meal deeper and deeper into its maw. It was an uncanny, unnatural thing.

“Giant worm,” Darrel said, letting out a harsh laugh even as he broke into a cold sweat. “I tried to show off on my last mission, wearing metal armor, but seems like that was a mistake. Armor’s useless against this thing, and the

weight of it slows me down in battle...” He shook his head, casting off his fear. “SwordWings, keep yourselves moving! This monster’s a troublesome one—it travels through the ground!”

The SwordWings raised their weapons, preparing themselves for battle.

“Don’t worry,” Darrel said, trying his best to encourage them. “We may be trapped, but the guys outside know we’re here. All we have to do is endure until our comrades arrive!” He gave them a wide grin. “Or, we could defeat this thing ourselves, and return conquering heroes!”

Chapter 39: An Adventurer's Worth

On the morning of the thirteenth day of the expedition, my party stumbled out of the dungeon, staring blearily at the sky above. The six of us had spent the night camping inside, leaving Rachel and Ralph behind to guard our tent.

Camping in the dungeon's unfamiliar environment had taken some getting used to, and everyone but Zelphy had the haggard look on their face that comes with a difficult night's rest. Sleeping hadn't turned out to be the most difficult aspect of spending a night in a dungeon, though—that honor was reserved for something else entirely. I hesitated to even think of the matter, I was so ashamed. It felt like my dignity had taken a serious hit.

"Hey, pep yourself up a bit," Zelphy exclaimed, trying to knock my party out of our mopey mood. "As long as you're alive, you gotta eat, and if you eat, it's gotta come back out somewhere. That's just how it works. It's best for you to see the reality of it now."

"Well, that's certainly true..." Rondo began, trying to be optimistic about the situation. "I mean, we were sleeping in enemy territory, after all. But do you really want me to teach that to Rachel and Ralph?"

To summarize, we were tired. We'd been in a foreign environment, and we'd had to do something to secure our own safety. *But...* I sank deeply into my thoughts, my breath releasing into a long, exhausted exhale.

The fifth head sighed. "You're just embarrassed because you're young," he informed me. "Soon, you'll realize that humans are all the same inside. I mean, on the battlefield, you'll find men oozing from all over—"

"Let's get back to the tent and sleep," I said, blocking out the fifth head's voice. "Yes, that sounds good. Let's sleep like we're dead."

I knew you're trying to teach me a life lesson, fifth head, I thought, but I would much prefer it if you kept your sage advice to yourself.

I looked eagerly toward our campsite, ready to collapse, but caught sight of

Eva hurrying in our direction. Her usual smile was missing.

She seems worried about something, I thought with dread.

Eva led us to the area outside of the Guild's central tent, where adventurers had clumped together in a large group. At this time in the morning, most of them should have been readying themselves to go dungeon diving, but today they were just standing around in full adventuring gear, arguing noisily about something.

I noticed a few exhausted-looking adventurers talking to Hawkins, who was surrounded by a bunch of people with anxious looks on their faces.

"Mister Hawkins!" a Guild staff member cried, rushing out of the reception tent. He had several Guild cards clutched in his hand. Hawkins silently took them, clenching them in his fist.

"Wh-When we were hurrying back here to report what happened, one of our members got d-done in by a monster," I heard one of the tattered adventurers say in a feeble voice. It was odd watching such a towering giant of a man break down in tears, but none of the other adventurers could fault him for having such a reaction. "By the time we got back here, a ton of time had gone by, and boss—Darrel, he disappeared behind the door! I couldn't save him..."

Zelphy's eyes widened. She started violently pushing her way to the front of the crowd. As soon as she got close enough for Hawkins to notice her, he grabbed her and led her toward the Guild tent.

"Lyle, you come too," Zelphy called over her shoulder.

"Lyle," the second head said abruptly, "hand over your things to Novem and have everyone else return to your tent. You should tell them to prepare to set out again."

Is he speaking from experience or intuition? I wondered.

In any case, I followed his orders, turning to Novem and offering her my bags. "Novem, have everyone on standby in the tent," I told her. "Prepare for another trip to the dungeon."

Novem took my things with a nod. “Understood.”

From that point out, I was on my own. I headed straight toward the Guild tent.

Oh, I thought upon entering. The adventurers from Central are here.

It was odd, though—even in a situation like this, I couldn’t feel any motivation from them whatsoever.

Is this just how they are usually?

I decided to ignore them, heading over to where Hawkins was standing with Zelphy and Santoire. Hawkins was checking through documents, still clad in the outdoor coat he wore while traveling.

He must have just returned from Darion, I thought.

Meanwhile, Santoire was huddled into herself, shaking, her gaze darting rapidly around the room. Zelphy stared at her expressionlessly, her emotions clearly boiling underneath the surface.

Hawkins looked up at all three of us when he finished reading the documents, settling in to summarize the situation. First he turned to Santoire. “You received a document informing you that a party that was supposed to return yesterday never came back, and you ignored it. Because of your oversight, Darrel had to gather up whatever willing adventurers he could find to search for them, and ended up being caught in a trap that was set off in the innermost chamber.”

“D-Don’t blame *me* for that!” Santoire cried, wrapping her arms around herself. “It’s *their* fault—they chose not to come back when they should have! And it’s not like I asked that old man to run out and...” Tears filled her eyes. “Why me?!”

“Yeah, just ignore her,” the third head declared. “She’s just trying to save her own skin. The full scope of the situation hasn’t even dawned on her yet. Talking to her is nothing but a waste of time.”

I winced at this assessment, then jumped when Hawkins violently slammed a stack of Guild cards on the table. There was a moment of silence.

“My apologies,” he said finally, his voice ominously calm. “I got emotional.

Zelphy, we'll need to gather some things for a rescue party—"

"A rescue is pointless," the leader of the Central party cut in. "I've run into traps of that ilk before. The door to the innermost chamber won't open again unless the boss is defeated, or all those fools are dead. Judging by how long they've been in there, they aren't capable of beating the boss. All we can do is wait for them to be wiped out. At this point, you should be focusing on the more important thing—sending in a party to clear the dungeon as soon as possible."

Something about the man's attitude seemed to catch in the fifth head's mind. "Wait—could these guys have been dispatched to monitor us?"

It wasn't a bad theory—the fifth head *had* told me earlier that Central wouldn't want to deal with a dungeon too close to their city. It was very possible that this group of adventurers had been sent here to ensure we cleared the dungeon with all due haste.

I glanced at the leader of the Central adventurers, who was still shooting Hawkins an intimidating glare. "You do realize that if you needlessly stimulate the dungeon in your attempts to rescue them, we'll have a rampaging dungeon on our hands, right? If that happens, the damage won't stop at Darion—it'll reach as far as Central. You're really willing to risk that, over ten measly adventurers?"

I winced. It seemed clear at this point that the Central adventurers' stance was to not kick the hornet's nest, even if that resulted in the deaths of other adventurers.

I glanced over at Zelphy. She was shaking with fury, her fists clenched tight.

Hawkins seemed like he had something to say too, but when he spoke, he just agreed to the Central adventurers' demands.

"I'm sorry for the confusion, sir. In Darion, we tend to value our adventurers. I think I'll go ahead and leave the subjugation effort to Zelphy here. Her skills are a cut above any of the other adventurers taking part in this expedition."

The adventurers from Central just stared at us with bored looks on their faces.

They're just as disinterested as always, I thought, irritated. *It kinda feels like*

they're making light of us.

I was relieved when their leader finally said, "Very well," and ducked out of the tent, the rest of his party in tow.

"Those pieces of shit!" Zelphy snarled.

The words were for a group of men who'd already left, but Zelphy knew better than to say it to their faces.

Zelphy's probably mortified she can't even attempt to save Darrel, I thought. I mean, they're close enough she felt comfortable placing bets with him, and now he's in a life-or-death situation and she can't do a thing.

"Zelphy, I apologize," Hawkins said. His words were polite, but he looked just as angry as Zelphy did. "Please gather a subjugation force, and go conquer the dungeon's innermost chamber."

Now that he's received such harsh criticism from the Central adventurers, he can't ask Zelphy to save Darrel or the SwordWings, no matter how frustrated he is, I realized.

Zelphy seemed to understand, though. She gave him a silent nod and turned to leave the tent.

I stirred into motion myself, trailing behind her.

Zelphy and I headed back to our tent at a steady pace. With each step, she mumbled out more of her memories—it was like she'd become possessed with the need to tell me everything she could about her time with Darrel.

"He was a terrible old man," she told me, voice thick. "He was always teasing me back when I was still a newbie, and whenever we bet on something, he'd always manage to snatch up all my money..." She let out a low laugh. "But Darrel...he's the one who raised me, you know? I was just a rookie, but he trained me until I was first-rate. When I was young and still didn't know how the world worked, he taught me how to live as an adventurer." She took a jagged breath, voice quavering. "He was so terrible that every time we got together, all I'd do was bitch and complain...and because of that, I never got to say thank you."

It hit me, then. *Zelphy's relationship with Darrel is the same as ours is with her. He was her mentor.*

"I know," she went on. "I *know* what those non-adventurers think. To them, the life of a single adventurer schmuck is worth less than trash. They see us as the lowest of the low, just some freaks who desecrate the bodies of disgusting monsters to scrounge up the Demonic Stones inside them. In the eyes of an average person, we're practically the same as mercenaries and bandits. We're just as rough, and violent, and detestable. But old Darrel...?" Zelphy took a shaky breath. "He was a good guy."

My gaze fell to my feet. Zelphy was right. In Banseim—no, in most of the world—people had an active disdain for the adventurer trade. Many non-adventurers outright despised people like us. We might receive warm treatment in Darion, but the city was a rare exception to the rule. In most other towns, no one cared whether adventurers lived or died. To be honest, the Central adventurers' reaction to what had happened to Darrel and the SwordWings could perhaps be considered the standard response.

Zelphy turned to me, and when I glanced up at her face, I saw her eyes were full of tears. She forced a smile, but it didn't put me at ease. It hurt me to even look at her.

"Hey, Lyle..." she said, a forced levity in her voice, "can't you come up with some outrageous idea to fix this, like you usually do? You've gotta be feeling at least a little motivated, right...?" She stared at me a moment in silence, then shook her head. "Sorry, I was just kidding. Forget I even asked." She let out a hollow laugh. "Good grief, and I'm supposed to be the instructor here..."

A sharp pang shot through my chest. *Zelphy knows they're beyond saving. That's why she asked me to help, and then gave up and wrote it off as a joke.*

My hand clenched hard around the Jewel. It was an unconscious action, but my ancestors responded to the motion anyway.

"Rescuing them...it's not impossible," the second head said thoughtfully.

The third head made a noise of agreement. "Yeah, and you know what? Those Central adventurers...they kinda tick me off."

“I’d like to turn the tables on them, or at least give them a good fright,” the fourth head agreed.

“I hate Central and everything it stands for,” the fifth head drawled. “I’m on board.”

The sixth head chuckled. “When someone tells you not to...it’s only human to want to do it anyway.”

“I hate adventurers, so it is unbearable to be ordered around by them,” the seventh head snarled. “I fully approve of this rescue plan!”

I felt a rush of relief. *I don’t know how to react*, I thought. *I usually feel so bothered whenever my ancestors get so worked up, but for once I’m actually overjoyed.*

“It’s about to get fun around here,” the second head said happily. “But Lyle, if you want to save them, you should hurry. Keep your baggage to a minimum, and bring your A-game.”

Zelphy had drifted ahead of me by now, her steps listless.

“Zelphy,” I called out, “we’ll be packing light, and prioritizing medicine and bandages.”

She drifted to a stop, looking at me over her shoulder. “Hey, now, you don’t need to put up a front to put me at ease...”

In my heart, I whispered, *Have confidence, Lyle. Have so much confidence that you can even fool yourself.*

“Me, put on a front?” I demanded. I stared straight into her eyes, summoning all the boldness I possessed. “If that’s what you think I’m doing, you have me all wrong. I’m telling you—we’re going to save them. I’m a hundred percent serious.”

“That’s the spirit, Lyle!” the sixth head boomed. “You’re getting the hang of this!”

I couldn’t help but grimace internally. *Why don’t I feel happy when I hear that from him?*

When we got to the tent, the others were already waiting, ready to head out.

“Keep our supplies to a bare minimum,” Zelphy instructed them. “We’ll mainly need medical supplies and some food rations. You’re to do your best to stay out of battle, even if we run into monsters on the way. We won’t be stopping to pick up chests either.”

“Zelphy...” Rondo started. He had a doubtful look on his face. “Eva told us the rumors, so we’ve got the general gist of what’s going on. From what we heard...wasn’t it decided that we shouldn’t try and rescue them?”

Zelphy shot Eva a look, and the elf averted her eyes.

“Where were you even listening from...?” Zelphy moaned, pressing her fingertips against her forehead. “Seriously, you elves...” She blew out a sigh. “Well, Eva was right. But Lyle here said we can do it, so...how about we take a gamble?”

Zelphy smacked me on the back, sending me stumbling toward the rest of the party. Forced to meet all their curious gazes head-on, I scratched embarrassedly at my hair. Then, with a deep inhale, I steadied my breath and straightened my back.

“Time is of the essence,” the fifth head advised me. “We’ll explain the plan while you’re on the move. Let’s be clear on this, though—if you get the chance, I want you to fight with everything you have. There’s no telling what you’ll be up against.”

“Those adventurers are trapped in the innermost chamber, but if they’re still alive, whatever’s in there can’t be that strong,” the sixth head continued. “Back in my day, the monsters that came out of those traps were never that strong. Though that doesn’t mean it won’t be tricky to handle.”

The rest of my ancestors chimed in to agree, calling things like, “Yep, that’s right,” and “Same here,” which made me inclined to think he was telling the truth. If the boss monster was outrageously powerful, then the SwordWings surely would have been annihilated by now.

With this knowledge in mind, I focused back on my party. “Our biggest problem is going to be our fighting strength,” I told them. “We can’t count on

the other parties as reinforcements, since they aren't used to moving using my Art. I want to take every one of you I can get, but if we all go, we'll be leaving this place vacant. We'll have to ask someone to watch over it."

"Lyle, over here!" Eva shouted, hand shooting into the air. "Yeah, right here! I'll watch over the tent for you. After all, you've been looking after me for a while now, and you've told me some interesting stories..."

I narrowed my eyes at her. She seemed...oddly cheery, despite everything that was going on. I couldn't shake the feeling that she was plotting something, but still... *It'd be better to leave this to her than to anyone else.*

"And as a reward, I'm guessing you'd like us to tell you all the details of the rescue operation when we return," Novem said dryly.

Eva gave her a tremendous nod. "Oh, would you?" the elf asked excitedly.

Zelphy gave her a reluctant nod. "We should send for Hawkins too—have him keep a lookout alongside Eva while we're in the dungeon. He should agree to that much."

And with that, we were all in agreement. All we had to do was finish our preparations, and then we'd be ready to venture into the dungeon.

"Remember, Lyle, this is a battle against time," the second head reminded me from inside the Jewel. "One wrong step, and we'll cause the dungeon to burst."

I closed my eyes, fingers tight around the Jewel. For a moment I just breathed. Then I opened my eyes again, and declared in a firm voice, "As soon as our preparations are complete, we're setting off."

When we entered the dungeon this time, all of us were traveling light—me in particular. At the moment, the only things I was carrying were the two sabers that graced my hips. Mostly this choice was due to my ancestors' advice, though Sophia's ability to lighten things with her Art had a bit to do with it as well.

Sophia had ended up carrying the heftiest load out of all of us, since she'd told us the weight of the supplies was a nonissue for her. Ralph, Rondo, and I

had given her our bags before we'd set out, after I'd decided that the three of us would serve as the party's vanguard. Still, it was clear that the unwieldy size of the load Sophia was carrying hindered her ability to move.

I couldn't help but feel a bit bad for her as we sprinted down the dungeon corridors. Ralph clearly felt the same—I caught him sending Sophia the occasional apologetic glance as we traveled on.

As we pushed forward, deeper into the dungeon, I listened to my ancestors as they explained their plan.

"Before we do anything else, there's one obstacle we'll have to get out of the way," the second head told me. "To rescue them, you'll have to destroy the door—the one sealing them inside the innermost chamber."

"And if you destroy it," the seventh head said, taking over from there, "there's a chance you might agitate the dungeon, and cause it to spin out of control. That's why those Central adventurers don't want to risk a rescue."

I nodded, still racing through the dungeon's hallways. The others followed close behind as I darted along, using Map to discern the optimal route to our destination.

"*However,*" the sixth head drawled, sounding oddly amused, "the dungeon won't just burst at the seams the second you inflict an excessive amount of damage to it. There's a window of time before overstimulation turns into full-on frenzy. The dungeon's gotta work itself up first."

"Remember, dungeons keep their treasure in the innermost chamber," the seventh said, steering the conversation in a slightly different direction. "As long as you can snatch up that treasure, the dungeon will wither—it will *die*. That's an immutable fact. That makes your goal simple—bust down the door to the innermost chamber and defeat the monster that rules inside before the dungeon starts going on a rampage."

As for how we'll be destroying that door... I mused, *perhaps Novem's magic will do the trick? I get the feeling she could do it—this is a forest dungeon, so the walls are all made up of trees, and the ground is dirt.*

My ancestors didn't bring up this part of the plan, though, so I redirected my

attention to progressing through the dungeon as fast as I could.

After a while, I spotted some monsters on my mental map—if we continued on our current route, we'd run right into them.

We don't have time to make a detour, I decided. Guess we'll just have to charge straight through them.

I drew both my sabers, and the others quickly reacted, readying their own weapons.

But I shook my head. "I'll handle it," I called over my shoulder. "All of you just keep going!"

Shortly after, the monsters popped into my line of sight. There were three of them—an orc and two goblins. They were sitting right in the center of the corridor, but once they noticed us, they started to climb to their feet.

"Lightning Bullet!" I called, sending a bullet spell hurtling straight toward them.

I continued sprinting forward, lifting my twin sabers and aiming their tips at a goblin apiece. There was a crackle, then a flash.

The scorched goblins opened their mouths and shrieked before collapsing to the ground. I pulled my blades free of their bodies, then tossed the saber in my right hand straight at the orc.

My blade sank home, stabbing deep into the orc's neck. I sprinted toward the monster, hooking my fingers around the saber's handle and purposefully widening the hole in its punctured throat as I pulled the blade free.

I didn't pause to watch it die—by the time the monster spat blood and fell to the ground, I'd already started running down the corridor again.

"Looks like that Growth improved your magic handling too," the third head said in a teasing tone. "Your spells seem like they're doing more damage now."

I bet the fourth head's about to complain about how wasteful we're being, not stopping to collect those monsters' materials and Demonic Stones, I thought snarkily.

"Lyle..." the fourth head drawled in a thoroughly offended tone. "Do you

think me a miser through and through?”

I winced. *He must have picked up on my line of thought.*

The fourth head blew out an exasperated sigh. “My word, even I understand there are sometimes more important things in life...” he muttered.

Looks like I misjudged him.

“As long as you get that treasure in the innermost chamber, those Demonic Stones and materials are—”

I stifled a laugh. *Nope, never mind. He’s still the fourth head.*

I turned my attention from my ancestors, then, focusing on sliding my sabers back into their sheaths.

“Lyle, you should take a break,” the second head told me. “You won’t be able to fight the monster in the innermost chamber if you’re all exhausted by the time you get there.”

I felt a tinge of unease. *But then we might not make it in time...* I worried.

“Calm down,” the fifth head said knowingly. “Keep in mind what you’re here for. You need everyone in fighting condition.”

Unable to argue with that, I immediately scanned the area for a suitable room for us to rest in.

“We’re going to take a short break,” I called out.

“Thanks,” Rondo said, glancing back at me and nodding. “Rachel’s getting close to her limit.”

It wasn’t long before I found a monster-less room. I led the others to it, and the moment the group of us walked inside, Rachel flopped onto the ground. Her breath came in heavy pants.

The second head and the fifth head were right, I thought. If I’d waited until we reached our destination to take a break, some of us wouldn’t be able to fight.

“I’m...s-sorry...” Rachel apologized. “My stamina...is...”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ralph broke in, trying to comfort her. “Just try and get some rest. If it comes down to it—”

“I could carry you, if you wanted,” Sophia offered. She lifted a hand, wiping away the layer of sweat that had gathered on her face.

“You sure?” Aria asked. “You look like you can keep going, but are you sure you’ll be okay?”

Sophia nodded as she lowered her heavy bags to the ground and rolled her shoulders. “I don’t have enough room to carry her on my back, but I shouldn’t have a problem transporting her if I hold her in my arms.”

I mean, can I really ask a girl to do that...? I thought, feeling adrift. Even if she can control weight, that’s still a little... But we are dealing with an emergency here, though...

Rachel chuckled, sending Sophia a grin. “If that’s our only option, I’ll be counting on your help. But we’re nearly at our destination, right?”

I shrugged internally. It was true we were close, distance-wise. We’d get to the innermost chamber pretty fast if we took the shortest possible route, but unfortunately there were a legion of monsters in our way. Taking a detour around them was going to add on a bit of travel time.

“Just tell her you’re almost there,” the sixth head urged me. “You don’t want to be stupidly honest when it comes to this one. You’ve gotta be careful what you say—everyone’s starting to grow impatient, not just her.”

I decided to heed the sixth head’s advice, and nodded at Rachel. “Yes, we’re close,” I told her. “We need to detour around some monsters, but we’re almost there.”

Even as we speak, an adventurer in the innermost chamber could be drawing his last breath, a voice whispered in the back of my mind. The thought made me anxious, but we didn’t have any choice but to rest. We had to recover whatever stamina we could.

Inside the innermost chamber, night had passed, and light had begun to stream down through the gaps between the branches and leaves weaving back and forth across the ceiling.

The SwordWings hadn't had a moment of rest all night. By daybreak, three of them had already met their end.

It seemed their magician wouldn't last much longer either—Rex clutched the man in his arms, watching as blood trickled from his mouth and excruciating pain etched itself over his face.

“Hey!” Rex gasped, voice choked. “Hey, don't die! If you die...then you'll be dead!”

The magician smiled weakly at Rex's weeping form. “You know, back at home...I was nothing. I could barely use magic right. They were always mocking me, and so...” His breath rattled in his chest. “And so...I was so happy when you guys...relied on me...”

The magician hadn't had the best life—he'd been born as the fifth son to a nobleman who'd fallen to adventurer status, and his mother had been the man's mistress. Growing up, he'd often been mocked for his lack of magical talent. Meeting Rex and joining the SwordWings had been one of the best things that had ever happened to him.

The magician let out a long sighing breath, and then, just like that, he was gone. He lay, still and dead, in Rex's arms.

Rex let out a sobbing cry, hunching over the magician's body. His sword and shield lay next to him, battered from the fight with the giant worm. His sword had folded back upon itself, and his shield was covered in dents.

So many of my comrades, dead... Rex thought in horror.

The two shield-bearing warriors had been the first to go. They'd pushed themselves beyond their limits, trying to protect their fellow SwordWings as best they could. Ultimately, they'd failed, and been devoured. The scout had gone next, snatched up when he'd tried to lure the giant worm away from the others. And now, their magician...

“You damn fool!” a voice roared. “Don't you go giving up until the end!”

Rex looked up at the owner of the voice—Darrel. The older man had been fighting on the frontline this whole time, trying to protect the remaining SwordWings from the giant worm. But now...even he had been caught up in the

monster's gaping maw.

Rex's fists clenched. He knew Darrel had mere moments left before the giant worm swallowed him whole.

"Darrel!" he shouted, but his voice was drowned out by the horrible scraping sound of the monster's sharp teeth ripping through Darrel's metal armor. Darrel's spear fell from his hand, its tip sticking into the ground.

"Darrel!" Rex screamed again.

The older man let out a painful laugh, and then he was gone.

The rest of the SwordWings stared on in horror, their faces pale with despair.

Rex grit his teeth, cursing himself for his carelessness. *This is all my fault! All because I—*

But there was no time to think such thoughts. Rex gently laid the magician on the ground and gripped the hilt of his broken sword. When he raised his eyes back to the giant worm, he saw it had already finished swallowing Darrel and was now shifting around, searching for its next prey. Shaking with rage, Rex catapulted his broken blade at the beast.

The giant worm turned to look at him—though perhaps *look* wasn't the right word, as the beast had no eyes. Its wide, gaping mouth swiveled in his direction.

Rex forced his haggard body into motion, sending his shield flying at the monster as well.

This time, the monster caught the flying object in its mouth, its body contracting as it swallowed the hunk of metal whole.

While the monster was distracted with the shield, Rex charged forward, scooping up the spear Darrel had dropped. He dug the end into the giant worm's side.

"Enough is enough, you damn worm!" he snarled.

But injuring the worm was easier said than done—its outer surface was covered with a slippery oil-like liquid that made it hard for an attack to do any meaningful damage. The few marks coloring its skin were all Darrel's

handiwork.

In addition, Rex was unaccustomed to wielding a spear. His stance fell apart as the weapon slid uselessly over the monster's body, failing to inflict even a scratch.

And then, the giant worm was upon him.

"Rex!" screamed one of his fellow SwordWings. The man leapt forward, shoving the hapless Rex out of the giant worm's reach.

Rex looked on in horror as his friend became the monster's next meal. The SwordWing screamed in agony as the monster tore him to pieces.

Rex's hand started to shake. "Why...?" he asked wildly. "Why did you save me?!"

Once it had finished claiming its sixth victim, the giant worm quivered before returning to its hiding place underground. It had done this from time to time during the hours they'd been trapped in the innermost chamber with it. It would move around beneath the dirt, each wave of tremors sending the SwordWings stumbling in terror. There was no way to tell when the beast would come flying up from the earth beneath their feet and attack them. It was almost like the monster was toying with them.

"This is why I never wanted to come here!" one of the surviving SwordWings shrieked, running toward the sealed doorway in a mad frenzy. He tried to force his way out with his weapon, slicing through the trees covering the archway.

He didn't get anywhere—the trees regenerated nearly as quickly as he was able to damage them. But the truth was, the SwordWing had known this before he even started slicing. They'd long since tried chopping through the trees. They'd gone at it with an axe, and even tried burning them to the ground. But alas, all their efforts had turned out to be hopeless.

The ground shook as the SwordWing continued to futilely slice at the trees. In the next instant, the giant worm emerged right by his side, its mouth engulfing him before it sank back underground.

That was the seventh one.

Only the supporter and the scout remained. They both gathered around Rex, hoping for something—anything. But Rex dropped the spear. He fell to his knees and wept.

“Dammit! *Dammit!* Goddess dammit...!”

All sorts of thoughts raced through his head. *If I’d just turned back there! If I’d just made the right call!*

And then suddenly...the ground stopped rumbling. They could no longer feel the giant worm moving around beneath them.

“What happened?” the scout muttered, staring at the ground.

The supporter took out a notepad. He flipped through it, skimming over a page which listed the characteristics of worm-type monsters.

“Worm-type monsters become sluggish for a while once their stomach is full,” he recited. “Usually, they stop moving for a while after they swallow one person.”

The giant worm might be massive, but it still had the same traits other worm-type monsters did.

That means it’s probably satisfied for the time being.

Rex let out a sardonic laugh. The thought held no solace for him. “What, so we’re just food to that thing...? Ha ha, so much for becoming a first-rate adventurer. What a pathetic way to go.”

The SwordWings—or what was left of them—sat on the spot, and gave up on resisting altogether.

My party stood, weapons in hand, outside what looked to be the entrance to the dungeon’s innermost chamber. Each and every one of them was prepared to fight at a moment’s notice.

Zelphy tried to slice away some of the trees blocking the entryway, but the marks she left healed almost immediately.

Apparently, it’s not going to be that simple, I thought. I wrapped a hand

around the Jewel. *We'll either have to blast through it, or burn it. Both options will require Novem's magic, but I should probably listen to my ancestors' opinions on the matter before I make any decisions.*

No sooner had I thought this, then the second head spoke. "All right, Lyle! Let's use my old man's weapon!"

My mind went blank. *Huh?*

I tapped a finger against the Jewel, hastily asking for an explanation.

That silver greatsword doesn't listen to me at all! I thought, baffled. *I can't control it, and I'll collapse as soon as I use it! If I call it out now, there's no way I'll be able to participate in the battle against the monster in the innermost chamber.*

"That greatsword is useless in battle, but it might come in handy here," the fifth head explained. "Novem's magic is more versatile, and could prove indispensable against whatever's in there. So, if we go by process of elimination...it has to be you."

I gave the Jewel a nudge to signal my reluctance to act on this idea.

The sixth head just laughed. "If you don't like the idea, then just don't faint! Show some guts, Lyle—it might just work."

Hold up a second, I thought, perturbed. *I was convinced we'd be using Novem's magic here. I did not agree to this plan.*

"Don't worry," the second head told me. "Even if you faint, your party can handle this without you. That's why we brought everyone along."

Hey, wait! Don't tell me I'm only here to open the door?!

Sophia watched Lyle as he stood in front of the door to the innermost chamber, brow furrowed in thought. His fingers fiddled absently with the heirloom necklace hanging from around his neck.

Is he thinking something over? Sophia wondered. *Or maybe he's trying to give us some time to rest...? The door's still blocked off, which means they're still fighting in there. Why else would he choose to pause now, of all times?*

She looked around, quickly noting that everyone appeared to be a little tired from all the running it had taken for them to get here. Zelphy was staring at Lyle with a serious look on her face, while Novem seemed to be simply awaiting his orders, completely confident in his decisions.

I highly doubt he came this far without a plan, Sophia thought. Is the door turning out to be a bigger problem than he originally thought...?

And yet...Lyle didn't seem confused at all. He was simply staring at the door and thinking.

Eventually, Lyle finally stopped drumming his fingers against the blue Gem he was wearing, and turned to face everyone.

"I'm going to blow this door away," he said seriously. "I'll have to put my all into it, so I don't know if I'll be able to participate in the battle once I'm finished. No matter what happens, after I've destroyed the door, I want all of you to run into the room and prepare yourselves for battle."

Novem suddenly panicked, her prior composure gone without a trace. "Milord, are you by any chance going to use that sword? You *mustn't*! You were knocked out cold the last time you used it!"

The rest of the group immediately picked up on what was happening. So... they all thought. *Lyle has a trump card big enough that the recoil knocks him out.*

Sophia's eyes narrowed. *Is that door really that troublesome to open...?* she wondered. *But, in that case...*

Sophia opened her mouth to ask Lyle why they couldn't just blow the door apart with Novem's magic, but Novem beat her to the punch.

"I'll take care of the door, milord," she declared firmly. "I know I can do it!"

Lyle shook his head, immediately shutting her down. "No can do," he told her. "Once we get in, we'll have to fight whatever monster is inside. It's possible we'll need your magic. Plus, if the people inside are on the verge of death, I want you to be able to treat them."

Lyle grabbed the gem around his neck again, his grip so tight that it looked

like he was about to tear it right off his neck. But even though he didn't move to do so, the chains came undone on their own. They wrapped around his arm, slowly taking on an entirely different shape.

Wow, Sophia thought, awed. *It's so beautiful...*

She stared at the weapon that had formed in Lyle's hand, then at Lyle himself. His eyes were locked determinedly on the door to the innermost chamber, his hands clenched around the massive silver sword he'd manifested. It was a horse-slaying sword, so large it was practically the size of a whole other person.

Chapter 40: The Giant Worm Battle

I took a deep breath and slowly lifted my right hand, picturing the shape of the greatsword in my head. Within a few seconds, the silver metal decorating the Jewel shifted into a fluid state. Once it was in its liquid form, the metal expanded rapidly, gaining impossible amounts of volume. It flowed forward, slowly taking on the shape of the weapon I'd imagined. I could feel the heavy weight of it in my palm.

I propped the sword on my shoulder, wrapping both hands firmly around the hilt. If I let it slip out of my grasp for even a second, the weapon would run rampant—I could just tell. Using it was like trying to ride an out-of-control horse that didn't recognize me as its rider.

I tried to bend the sword to my will using the founder's Arts, but all I felt was my mana slipping away.

"Lyle, a single strike will be enough!" the second head called out to me. "Don't push yourself! Just picture what you're capable of doing right now, in this moment."

Using the third stage of the founder's Art, Full Burst, wasn't a possibility for me at the moment. But the first stage of the founder's Art, Full Over...now *that* felt promising.

"Full...Over...!" I gasped, breath harsh in my lungs.

The moment the Art activated, I could feel my strength growing. I held the sword up, preparing to strike the door even as it thrashed in my hand. I could feel how much it detested even the notion of being wielded by me.

"Come on, you bucking bronco," I cried, forcing the blade forward and swinging it toward the door. "How about you try being useful for once?!"



BOOOM!

Splinters of wood went scattering through the air, leaving a hole not only in the trees that had been blocking our path, but the surrounding foliage as well. When the blade had hit the wall, it had released a shock wave that leveled everything within its blast radius.

As I stared at the place where the wall used to be, the tip of the blade kept moving forward, the tip slamming into the ground. A cloud of dirt exploded into the air, and I went flying. The Jewel and its necklace came flying after me, the silver broadsword having reverted to its original form as soon as my hands slipped from its handle.

Even airborne, I could feel the dungeon pulsing. The shock wave from my blow reverberated through its twisting corridors like a howling scream.

A trickle of relief went through me. *I did it*, I thought. *I did what I was supposed to do*. I was thankful I'd managed it the first try—my body felt drained of all its strength, and my mana pool was so low that I could hardly hear my ancestors' voices anymore.

I felt a flicker of worry over my coming impact with the ground, but Aria snatched me—and the Jewel too, while she was at it—out of the air before I slammed into the dirt. Apparently, she'd used her Art to accelerate herself into a flying leap so she could grab me in time.

"That was total overkill!" she chided me.

I couldn't help it—I started to laugh. "Aha ha ha, thanks for the help."

Aria's feet thumped back into the earth as I craned my neck, trying to take a look at the innermost chamber door. I'd cut a large gash from the top right to the bottom left, revealing the room that lay inside. The rest of our party had already rushed through the gap.

Once Aria was steady on her feet, she took off toward the chamber. The sudden change in direction knocked the air straight out of my lungs.

Looks like the trees are regenerating already, I thought as we drew closer. *That gap won't be there for much longer*.

Then we were inside the chamber, and Aria was slowly lowering me onto the ground. I let out a choked sound, still reeling from how it had felt to be carried around while she'd used her Art. "Doesn't it hurt, doing that all the time?" I asked hoarsely.

"Not really," she said, giving me a nonchalant shrug as she wrapped the Jewel back around my neck. "I'm perfectly fine, honest."

I took her at her word, shifting my attention to surveying the innermost chamber. Novem had just rushed up to my side when my eyes fell on three people standing in the center of the room, their heads bowed. It seemed there was no one else to be seen.

I turned to Novem. "Let's help those three first, then figure out the rest from there," I told her.

She nodded, immediately whirling around and heading off toward the survivors. "I'll get started right away!"

The three men glanced up as she approached, but there was no excitement on their faces at the prospect of being rescued. They just stared blankly ahead, their eyes hollow.

"Good work, Lyle," the fifth head's faint voice said from within the Jewel. "You managed to maintain consciousness. I wish I could tell you all you had to do now was sit here and give directions, but..."

"You might want to have Sophia carry you," the sixth head chimed in. "Looks like the enemy's a digger. You'll need to keep on the move."

So your solution is to have Sophia carry me? I thought incredulously. Then I just sighed and shook my head. *Never mind, complaining won't get me anywhere.*

"Sorry to bother you, Sophia," I said weakly, "but could you carry me? It seems like the boss is underground."

I felt absolutely pathetic, but now wasn't the time for pride. My body was terribly sluggish—I needed the help.

Sophia quickly came over and grabbed me. I didn't feel anything, but her Art

must have been making me lighter, since she managed to hoist me up and over her shoulder with a single hand.

I must look a mess, I thought, a bit embarrassed.

“How much energy did you have to waste to end up like this?” Sophia demanded. “You shouldn’t push yourself that hard.”

“I’m sorry,” I told her sheepishly. “Just give me a minute, and I think I’ll be able to walk by myself.”

In the meantime, we both glanced over to where Novem was talking to the three surviving members of the SwordWings. From what I could tell, Novem was looking them over to make sure they weren’t injured.

“Are you all right?” Novem asked the group of men, trying to assess the situation. Her voice sounded a bit flustered, like she was struggling not to be distracted by my current predicament. “What happened?”

The SwordWings’ faces remained expressionless. Their heads drooped. Finally, one of the men, who had purple hair, began to cry.

“They all died...” he sobbed. “It’s all my fault... The only reason we’re still alive is because the monster ate its fill...”

Those were not the words I was hoping to hear. I felt sick; it was a dreadful thing to learn, that we’d only been able to save three of them.

The sixth head seemed to think about it differently, however. “Think of it like this, Lyle,” he insisted. “You managed to save three whole human beings who would have otherwise perished. You did the best you could with the resources you had available. Puff out your chest. You should be proud.”

Yeah, chest puffing isn’t gonna be a thing as long as I’m slung over a girl’s shoulder like a knapsack—

My attention snapped to the ground. Something was moving underneath us.

“Search...” I mumbled, activating the sixth head’s Art. It confirmed my suspicions—the dungeon’s agitation must have caused whatever was down there to start moving around again.

“This is bad,” I muttered, starting to panic. “Map and Search should—”

“Hey, stupid!” the fifth head yelled. “This isn’t the place for that! At close range, you should be using—”

“Calm down, Lyle,” the second head said calmly, cutting him off. “Use the second stage of my Art, just like I taught you. Times like this are where my Art truly shines. Once you activate it, you’ll be able to grasp the monster’s movements like the back of your hand—it won’t even matter that it’s underground. Don’t worry.”

My head snapped up. *Map and Search have been so useful I’ve become dependent on them*, I realized. *But using them isn’t the right call here.*

I deployed Field, immediately confirming that the monster was shifting around in the dirt under our feet.

“It’s below us!” I shouted. “Keep moving or it’ll target you!”

Everyone began moving all at once, their eyes locked on the ground at their feet. My eyes caught on something black with white speckles slinking its way out of the dirt where Ralph had been standing only moments before. *A snake?* I wondered. *But no, it feels more...ominous than that.*

Novem raised her staff, firing a ball of flames at the creature. “It’s a giant worm,” she cried. “Be careful—they hide underground and attack from below!”

My eyes danced over the tattered ground; it was proof of all the times the giant worm had come and gone. Normally, the earth in the dungeon would have repaired itself, reverting back to its original state, but for some reason the floor of the innermost chamber was going through this process incredibly slowly. Some of the giant worm’s holes had yet to close back up, and many parts of the floor had been left softer than the rest of the firm ground. Sophia kept tripping over the more malleable spots as she ran.

Compared to how fast the trees at the entrance healed...it almost feels like the dungeon’s showing favoritism toward that huge beast.

“All of you, listen up!” Zelphy barked as she zipped around. “As soon as that thing pops out of the ground, start whaling away at it!” She glanced over at me, still dangling over Sophia’s shoulder. “Lyle, you can see it, so tell us what we should do. Keep us informed on where it’s gonna emerge nex—”

But the giant worm was already heading toward its next meal.

“It’s after those three!” I cried, pointing at the remaining SwordWings.

The three men stood frozen, even though I’d warned them to run. It was like their hearts had shattered in their chests, and they were just waiting for death to claim them.

Zelphy raced forward, desperately trying to get herself in range to do something to save them. “Aria!” she shouted.

“Leave it to me!” Aria called back, quickly grasping what Zelphy wanted her to do.

The younger girl shot forward, using the speed her Art granted her to snatch up the three despondent SwordWings and haul them out of harm’s way. She’d only just handed them off to Zelphy when the giant worm burst up out of the ground, its mouth open wide.

Aria grimaced. “Whoa, that’s a lot of teeth.”

She isn’t wrong, I thought, staring at the beast. The sight of all those rows of sharp teeth in that ring-like mouth...it’s just uncanny.

“I’ve got you now!” Rachel cried, lifting her staff high. “Sand Arm!”

A massive powdery earthen arm emerged from the ground, its fingers wrapping around the body of the giant worm. The huge beast just wriggled, using its soft body and slimy outer coating to slide right out of the spell’s grasp.

“Holding it will be difficult,” Novem warned the others. “Try to burn it instead!” She narrowed her eyes at the monster, and yelled, “Fire Cannon!”

A large fiery orb went flying through the air, soaring toward the giant worm. Just before it landed, the orb burst into a glorious flaming explosion, which collided forcefully with the monster’s flank.

The giant worm immediately fled back underground.

We can beat this thing, I thought, but we’ve got bigger problems.

“The dungeon’s been a bit noisy for a while now,” Sophia murmured from above my head.

She was right—we'd agitated the dungeon, and now it was slowly building itself up to an explosion.

"We don't have the time to mess around," I said firmly. "Just chipping away at this thing isn't going to be enough. We...we should get the treasure first!"

"The treasure won't appear unless you defeat the master of the innermost chamber," the third head corrected me. "I guess they're calling them bosses these days...? Regardless, it seems you've found yourself quite the troublesome foe."

If even the third head is calling it troublesome, that means it's a strong one, doesn't it...? I thought.

"To be honest, Lyle, we...well. We don't have any experience fighting giant worms."

My other ancestors murmured their agreements.

Wait... Then how am I supposed to know what to do?!

"I think that's quite enough," Zelphy snarled, her teeth grinding as she stared in disgust at the lifeless faces of the trio of adventurers Aria had saved. "Do you know what we had to go through thanks to you?"

Her hands clenched into fists when she only received silence as a reply. Rage flooded her body, and her temper snapped. Before she knew it, she'd hauled back and walloped the whole lot of them.

"You should have just left us," Rex said, his eyes full of despair. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth—Zelphy's punch had sliced part of his gums clean open. "Look at what you've done—the dungeon's about to burst! You should have just left us to die!"

This is the thanks we get? Zelphy thought, vision going red. *Those kids're damn lucky I've got no intentions of abandoning them here.*

"You idiots are a helluva lot more pathetic than I expected after all that high praise I heard from Darrel," Zelphy snapped back. "We're *adventurers*, you hear me? We'll kick, and scream, and do whatever it takes to survive!" This time she didn't punch them—she thwacked them with a booted foot instead, tearing her

sword from her sheath at the same time. “Get a *move on!*”

At the mention of Darrel’s name, the SwordWings had slowly started to stir. Faced with the additional threat of Zelphy’s solid kicks, they finally began to run.

Good, Zelphy thought, staring after them. *That’s as it should be. Now, to do something about the—*

The giant worm burst out of the ground, only inches away.

Zelphy leapt forward, swinging at the monster with her shield as she used her Art, Fire Shot, to send several small fiery orbs careening into its side. Unfortunately, they vanished all too quickly, too weak to do much more than scorch the surface of the giant worm’s skin.

“Dammit,” Zelphy growled. “Looks like my Art isn’t going to cut it.”

She paused to calculate her next move, but Aria came flying out from behind her before she had much of a chance. The younger woman was moving so fast that Zelphy could only stare as Aria thrust her spear right into the giant worm.

“It’s all slimy and gross,” Aria shouted, her nose wrinkling as she tore her spear back out of the monster’s body. The surface of the weapon was slathered with mucus and blood.

Something about the scene hit Zelphy in the chest. *Milady*, she thought, falling back into calling Aria the title she’d used for her when she’d served House Lockwood so long ago. *Y-You...don’t need my protection anymore, do you?*

The adorable little girl she had once played with and affectionately thought of as a younger sister was now strong enough to stab a spear deep into a monster that Zelphy couldn’t even damage.

I see, Zelphy thought, a trickle of loneliness going through her. She shifted her grip on her weapon, turning to take in the rest of the room. Her eyes traced over Rondo’s party, who were maneuvering themselves commendably, before eventually falling on Lyle, who was lying over Sophia’s shoulder, unable to move, but was still calling out the giant worm’s subterranean movements with impressive accuracy.

I see, Zelphy thought again. So they've all surpassed me, huh?

She took a deep breath and pulled her gaze away from the movements of Lyle's party, focusing in on the three surviving SwordWings instead. "If you want to survive, keep running!" she barked at them. "We'll handle the rest!"

After all, she thought, a slight grin lifting her lips, Lyle's always the strongest when push comes to shove.

This is hopeless, I thought miserably. I was still in disbelief that after all those pep talks, all those times my ancestors had insisted I just leave my problems to them, they'd turned around and revealed that they'd never fought a giant worm before.

It's a bit late to tell me that, don't you think?! I demanded internally, before sinking deeper into contemplation. If my ancestors can't help me here, then...I'll just have to think of a way to defeat it myself!

My mind raced as I flopped around over Sophia's shoulder, eyes on Rondo and Ralph. They'd circled around the giant worm the moment it emerged again, positioning themselves on opposite sides of it.

Once in position, they locked eyes and nodded, sending their weapons slicing toward the beast in concert. A low buzz filled the air, Rondo's blade revving as he activated its Art.

"Ralph, you better cut it deep!" Rondo called over the noise.

"You got it!" Ralph called back.

Ralph stepped forward and swung again, his spear flying forward in a great horizontal arc. The blow sent slimy secretions and fluids scattering across the dirt floor.

The giant worm's gaping maw widened even farther as it let out a piercing scream. It thumped down and laid flat on the ground, rolling back and forth as if it were writhing in pain.

"Miss Rachel!" Novem cried from her position a few yards away. "Cast now!"

"On it!"

Fire burst forth from both women's staves, drenching the giant worm in flames. The monster whirled around, enraged at being scorched, and came barreling toward Sophia—and, as it so happens, me.

"Sophia, run—!"

"No!" she snapped, pulling me over her shoulder and plopping me down to the ground. "I can do this!"

Sophia wrapped both hands around the hilt of her battle-axe, coiled up, and heaved it forward. The weapon flew from her hands, spinning once, then twice. On its third rotation, the axe ripped into the giant worm's large sinister mouth, cleaving a portion of it clean off. Then...

Thump.

Even once it had hit the worm, Sophia's axe had continued on its course. Now it quivered, its blade sunk deep into the chamber's wall.

"That was amazing, Sophia!" I said, grinning at her from my spot on the ground.

But the giant worm wasn't dead yet—it was just as tough as you'd expect a boss to be. I watched as it squirmed feebly against the dirt, trying to dive back underground. Once it achieved its goal, we wouldn't have the means—or the time—to defeat it.

Rondo and Ralph were out of the battle for now, wiping frantically at their weapons. They'd cut so deep into the giant worm that their weapons had been drenched in sticky goo, leaving them practically unusable.

"For crying out loud!" Rondo snarled.

Ralph's face crumpled in frustration. "I can't stab it like this!"

Zelphy took a few stabs at the monster, but her weapon was soon ruined as well. Rachel was similarly helpless—she was still too tired to launch an attack after firing her magic in such rapid succession. Aria stepped forward, taking the lead, but her spear was already covered in slippery liquid, and it slid right out of her hands.

Novem was the only one left who could still fight effectively, but even though

she continued to rain fire down upon the giant worm, it didn't look like that would be enough to defeat it.

Sophia reached for her hatchets and chucked them at the monster, trying to help, but they didn't manage to pierce that deeply into the giant worm's body. In the end, they just ended up sticking from the monster's sides, having inflicted little damage at all.

"Just a little more..." I shouted. "All we need is one more push!"

Using the second head's Field Art, I could sense that the giant worm was growing weaker.

Now that we have a strategy, defeating the monster will be simple enough, I thought. The problem is time.

If we continued fighting like this, it would take us a while before we were able to fully kill the beast—and judging by the way the dungeon was reacting, we didn't have much longer before everything spiraled out of control.

"You know..." the second head said out of the blue, "if you want to settle things fast, attacking it from the inside would probably be your best bet."

I swallowed a gasp of surprise—Sophia didn't seem to notice, but I still cursed myself for failing to keep my emotions in check.

"Hmm..." the third head pondered. "I guess you could shove some fire or lightning in its open mouth..."

"No, that's not reliable enough," the fourth head broke in. "If you really want to strike it dead in its tracks, I'd say the best thing to do is get in there and do some real damage."

"In which case," the fifth head agreed, "your next step of action is to charge right into that worm's stomach. And you can't just let yourself be eaten normally. You'd best jump in while its mouth is open wide—otherwise, those sharp teeth will tear you a new one."

This idea seemed to rouse the sixth head's interest. "That raises the difficulty level a bit, though," he mused. "I don't imagine Novem's capable of doing something like that."

I found myself agreeing—even Novem would have a hard time firing off magic while inside of a giant monster’s stomach.

“But...” the seventh head said slowly, “Lyle can do it. All he has to do is use the second head’s Field Art.”

My hand clenched tight around the Jewel. *Is he serious?!*

“Trust me, Lyle,” the second head told me in a gentle voice. “He’s right—you can manage it with my Art. You’ll need some assistance, though, due to your current condition.”

I should get the plan going as soon as I can, I decided, steadying my resolve. I refused to let myself ponder whether what I was going to try was possible or not. *If I’m going to dive into that worm’s stomach, I should try to jump in when its mouth is open as wide as we can get it.*

I called out to Aria and Sophia, getting both girls’ attention. Aria darted to Sophia’s side, and I immediately dove into explaining my plan.

“I need you to catapult me into the giant worm’s mouth the moment it emerges from the ground,” I told them. “Preferably, when it’s facing up!”

Unsurprisingly, they both responded by questioning my sanity.

“Are you crazy?!” Aria cried out. “That puts you at the greatest risk.”

Sophia nodded, seeming to share her opinion. “I’m against it. Voluntarily going in there...you make one wrong step, and you’ll just be committing suicide.”

I felt a bit moved that they were so concerned for me, but I couldn’t give in to their worries. *I’m skeptical too, but at this rate, the dungeon’s going to burst!*

The second head chuckled from inside the Jewel. “Look how much they care about you—feels good, doesn’t it? But don’t worry, my Art will take care of everything.”

The second head’s Field Art sure is convenient, I thought. *It’s really well-suited for combat. At times like these, it’s more reliable than the fifth and sixth heads’ Arts combined.*

Thus reassured, I focused back on the girls. “We don’t have much time,” I told

them, practically forcing them to agree. “Please, start preparing.”

Faced with my firm response, Aria and Sophia both jumped right to it—Sophia lifted me back into her arms, reducing both of our weights, and Aria hoisted us both into the air.

“Oh, whatever!” Aria snapped. “If something happens, it’s your problem now!”

The giant worm had made its way back underground by then, and the earth slowly shifted beneath us at its passage. The rest of our party shifted about, keeping in constant motion, while the three of us remained still, rooted to the spot.

“What are you doing?!” Rondo cried out.

But there was no time to answer—we’d become the giant worm’s target. I sensed it, lying in wait just beneath our feet. I focused intently on it, counting down until it was just the right moment.

“Aria!” I shouted, “*Now!*”

Aria bent her knees, sinking into a crouch before launching us all straight up into the air. The world whirled by as she accelerated to full speed, our surroundings blurring until I felt like I was looking at another world entirely. I was overcome with a feeling of weightlessness, and as I stared out blankly at my muddled space around me, I found that I had lost all sense of where I was. I couldn’t imagine Sophia felt much different.

A moment later, my world snapped back into focus, the second head’s Art transmitting the details of my surroundings to me. Below us, I sensed the giant worm shooting out of the ground, its mouth gaping as it tried to snatch us out of the air. Since I was using Field, I knew innately that the monster’s rows of uncannily sharp teeth were spread as wide as they could go.

“Throw me straight down!” I ordered Sophia.

She immediately adjusted her stance, preparing to send me flying. “You have to stay safe!” she reminded me. “No matter what!”

She launched me forward, then, but my perception of space was all off.

Instead of feeling like I'd been thrown, I felt as if I'd suddenly grown far heavier, my new weight sending me catapulting toward the earth. It was as if this whole time I'd been floating like a feather, and then gravity had remembered me and begun to pull me in.

Regardless, I went hurtling through the air toward the monster's gaping maw. I drew my sabers from my belt along the way, using Field to make minute shifts in my posture until I was in the right position. The Art also helpfully transmitted other details of my surroundings, like Novem's mortified face.

"Lord Lyle!" she screamed in horror.

I gathered my resolve.

"I'm going to settle this!" I yelled back.

And then I was in the giant worm's mouth, and there was no more time to explain.

The monster's throat flexed, but it seemed that when Sophia had cleaved its mouth open with her battle-axe, the giant worm had lost the ability to rotate the sharp teeth rings inside of its maw. Robbed of this killing tool, the monster decided to contract its throat instead, trying to crush me flat.

Fortunately, thanks to the burst of speed I'd gained when Sophia threw me, the giant worm's timing was off. By the time its mouth constricted shut, I'd already shot down its gullet.

"Lyle," the second head said calmly, "using Field, you can perceive more than just the distance between you and your foe—you can perceive *everything*. To have such perception is to grasp an important part of the essence of combat. By fully utilizing my Art, you have already managed to step into the realm of a master-class fighter."

The second head's Art may be pretty simple, but it's amazing regardless, I thought. I can even use it on a large group of people, allowing them to exhibit a level of strength that's several times more powerful than they could otherwise manage.

But now was definitely not the time to think about such things. I drew on all the information Field gave me, searching, and searching...

“The best place to stick my blade...” I mumbled, “it’s...here!”

I stabbed one of my sabers into part of the giant worm’s fleshy inner wall. The blade carved a line into the monster’s flesh as I continued to fall down its throat, descending toward its stomach. Blood rained down on me, mixing with the sticky fluids secreting from the giant worm’s insides.

I’m a mess, I thought in disgust.

My descent had slowed—I’d made it deep enough in the giant worm’s gaping maw that the previously wide opening had shrunk into a much smaller passage, its walls pressing in on me enough that it was a struggle to move at all. A foul odor filled the air—bloody, rotten.

I released the hilt of one of my sabers, splaying the fingers of my left hand open in front of me as I began to call to my magic. My right hand stayed clenched around my second saber as the world inside the worm tilted left and right; my head swirled as I tried to maintain my balance.

The giant worm must be thrashing around, I thought.

My magic slowly gathered to full strength as I shot the giant worm’s insides a slight grin. “You might be tough on the outside, but what about the inside?” I asked menacingly. “I’m gonna tear right through you! Ice Needle!”

The spell manifested a short distance before my outstretched hand, a thorn of ice appearing in the air. It grew larger and larger, quickly expanding outward and stabbing right into the giant worm’s flesh. By the time it tore itself free of the monster’s body, the spike was nearly as large as a pillar. It was so cold it froze all the flesh it touched solid.

“I’m not done yet!” I roared, forcefully squeezing out every last bit of mana I had.

The ice spike grew even larger, its size and weight shredding the giant worm apart.

The monster thrashed, its fleshy walls contracting around me. I began to worry that I would be crushed as its sticky inner fluids froze over, the area growing so cold that my breath came out in white puffs.

Then...it was over. The giant worm came to a complete stop.

“Lyle!” I heard a voice call from outside the worm.

A blade thrust into the narrow passage I was trapped in, light pouring in from the outside. As the monster’s flesh parted, I could see Rondo through the gap. It was Ralph, however, who stuck his arm through the hole and offered me a hand.

“Grab on!” he barked.

I let out an exhausted sigh. “Thanks.”

I must have used too much mana, I thought as I reached out toward Ralph. *I can’t hear my ancestors anymore.*

Ralph grabbed onto my outstretched hand, then, hauling me straight out of the giant worm’s innards.

“You’re way too reckless,” Rondo scolded me. “I was breaking into a cold sweat just watching you!”

“I’ll say,” Ralph said, laughing. “You’re gutsier than you look, Lyle. Next time we go to Ciel, it’ll be my treat.”

I sent them both a wry smile, but I was still busy staring at the body of the giant worm. My brain noted absently that it looked like my Ice Needle spell had pinned the monster to the ground as it tore the monster open from the inside.

I only looked up when I noticed Novem racing over in our direction. *She must be worried,* I thought. I smiled sweetly at her, and...

“Take this!”

Novem released a torrent of water at us, the deluge so intense that we were blown right off our feet. My body was so cold from the ice magic that the water actually felt a bit painful against my skin. The sudden assault sent me into a bit of a panic.

Did I piss her off or something?!

“N-Novem?!” I stammered. “Hey, I—”

Zelphy walked up, cutting me short with a raised hand. “You better get the

rest of that stomach acid off you,” she said. “That should be your priority for the time being. Novem, can you handle removing the rest?”

Novem gave her a firm nod, before turning back to me. “Milord, please just endure the process for now. It will come off soon enough.”

“H-Hey,” I managed, shivering. “A-At least use warm water...”

My pleas went unheard—they were erased in the rush of another turbulent stream.

Rex watched from a distance as Lyle and his party triumphed over the giant worm. He couldn’t help but feel frustrated—or, more accurately, miserable—at the sight.

They managed to defeat that thing in such a short time, and yet we didn’t stand a chance, Rex thought bitterly. How could we, when they’re better than us in every way? They’ve got a skilled magician, two fighters with manifested Arts, and that Womanizer kid, who’s skilled in swordsmanship and magic. The SwordWings can’t even begin to compare.

Rex let out a harsh laugh. “How the hell were we supposed to win against that thing? Our two parties...we’re different on a fundamental level.”

He watched as Lyle got blasted with water. He looks completely pathetic, but his skills are the real deal. I can’t believe I listened to all the rumors, and thought he was just some playboy... I’m such an idiot.

A wave of misery came over Rex, and he hunkered down on the spot, tears filling his eyes. Because of me, my party lost so many precious comrades. Even Darrel is dead. Why...why am I even still alive?

He sobbed and sobbed, but the two comrades he had left had nothing to say to him.

Zelphy walked up to the three of them then. She looked at Rex and said in a flat tone, “You understand what you’ve done, right?”

Rex lifted his head, looking up at her. Zelphy’s face was blank—there was no anger in it, no condescension. There had been no emotion in her voice either,

just plain indifference. Her lack of condemnation felt even worse to Rex than if she'd started screaming at them.

You could at least curse at me, he thought.

"It's all my fault..." Rex told Zelphy softly. "If you're going to blame anyone for this, blame me."

"Don't you misunderstand me," Zelphy said, tone hard. "*We're* the ones who did something reckless here. All you did was break Guild rules and cause a search party to be sent out after you."

I...guess that's true, Rex thought. *They overstimulated the dungeon, which could've caused complete chaos.*

Even if the dungeon hadn't ultimately descended into a frenzy, technically what Lyle's party had done was far worse than the SwordWings' crimes. All the SwordWings had done was linger in the dungeon too long, causing unnecessary trouble to the Guild and the other adventurers.

"One other adventurer ended up dead beyond those in your party—he was one of the guys helping Darrel. You better make sure you go and apologize to his comrades later. Prepare to take a good punch to the face."

"You're...not going to blame me for what happened?" Rex asked, rising slowly back to his feet. "I mean, Darrel died because of—"

Zelphy stepped forward abruptly, seizing Rex by his lapels and hoisting him up into the air. It was only then, with their faces inches apart, that Rex finally was able to see the rage churning in her eyes.

"It would be a lie to say I'm not furious with you," she snarled, "but Darrel made his choice. Real adventurers take responsibility for their actions—that's just the way things work. Dying because you made the wrong decision is all part of the job."

Zelphy's words hit Rex right in the chest. Tears poured down his face as he thought of his mistake, and how it had caused the loss of so many lives.

"I w-want to apologize to Darrel, but he's...he's gone...and I... We..."

Zelphy released her grip on Rex's lapels, sending the other adventurer

slamming straight into the ground. He didn't stand back up—he just curled into himself, sobbing.

I stared absently at the back of the innermost chamber, feeling very wet and cold. My eyes caught on a large fruit that was dangling from the ceiling, swaying back and forth near the rear wall of the room. I had no idea when or how it had gotten there, but it was bright yellow and very ripe. Or, at least I *thought* it was ripe, judging by the sweet scent that was drifting off of it and enveloping the room.

You know, that's a really big fruit, I mused. *I think a whole adult human could crawl into it, no problem.*

Zelphy had seen the fruit too, and was taking casual jabs at it with her sword. It looked really hard from the outside, but once she'd slowly carved a cut down the center of it, the entire thing split, spilling its contents out on the floor.

I blinked in shock—the fruit hadn't been filled with juice or pulp, but lumps of metal.

Wait, scratch that, I thought as I squinted closer. *The metal's covered in fruit juice.*

The ingots kept falling out of the fruit one after the other; they were pitch-black, and small enough to fit in the palm of my hand. There were so many that I would never be able to hold all of them at once.

We all watched for a while as the fruit emptied its contents into the dirt, then stared as it shriveled up into an empty husk. The stem holding it to the ceiling snapped, and the fruit's withered remains fell to the floor.

Zelphy let out a piercing whistle. “That, my friends, is a jackpot.” She turned and smiled at all of us. “This dungeon was a pretty big pain in the ass, but this makes up for it. Come on, get over here and gather them all up. Get a good look at them while you're at it. These ingots are made of rarium.”

I picked up one of the hunks of black iron, immediately feeling that it wasn't the same as normal metal. I could sense a faint hint of mana emitting from it.

“These ingots are pretty heavy,” Aria said to Zelphy. “Are we going to be able to carry it all with this many people?”

Maybe Sophia could do it...? I thought. If there were just a few ingots, it wouldn't be a problem, but there are just way too many for us to carry back all at once.

But before I could voice these thoughts, Zelphy cracked up laughing.

“It won't be a problem,” she said, grinning. “Why don't you take a better look around you?”

I looked around the room, as she'd instructed. It seemed quiet—far too quiet. It wasn't like we had been constantly surrounded by sound, but the dungeon felt...different than it had before.

I guess we actually did manage to stop the dungeon from going out of control, I thought, feeling relieved.

When she saw us just standing there, blankly looking around, Zelphy laughed again. She lifted a hand and pointed at the entrance to the room. “Out there,” she said. “Go take a look.”

Normally, I would have just checked out the area using my Arts, but I'd burned up all my mana. There was no one left to enlighten me either, since I couldn't hear any of my ancestors' voices.

It feels...kinda lonely, not being able to talk to them, I was forced to admit.

Ralph was the first of us to take Zelphy's advice. He slung his spear over his shoulder and headed to the entrance, cautiously creeping through the door. Only a few moments passed, and then he was back, his face full of surprise.

“Rondo! We ran a long distance to get here, didn't we?!” he exclaimed.

“Y-Yeah,” Rondo agreed. “What's wrong, Ralph?”

“It's just a straight path out there, with a few rooms left on either side!” Ralph told us excitedly. “I saw some adventurers poking their heads outta the rooms too. And once you get to the end of the path, you're outside! The camp's right there!”

When we looked outside, it was like the dungeon had collapsed in on itself, its

vastness scaling down to an infinitely smaller size. From what we could tell, only the rooms that had had adventurers in them were left standing.

“I see...” I said, fascinated. “So this is what it’s like when a dungeon withers.”

I smiled giddily to myself. *We conquered our first dungeon, and got to experience it when it withered.*

Novem walked up to me, producing a towel from one of her bags. She smiled, placing it in my hand. “And thus ends the subjugation, milord,” she said lightly.

Our expedition certainly didn’t go like we planned it to, but now it’s over, I thought. And we’ve got ourselves a huge amount of rarium to take home with us.

I looked up at the light filtering down on us from above—it was normal sunshine now, not the unnatural gleam that had shone inside the dungeon. I stared at it, and stared at it, and then...my knees gave out on me.

“Milord!” Novem cried, reaching out and grabbing me before I could hit the ground.

“Sorry,” I mumbled weakly. Her arms were so warm around me. “Once I relaxed, I just suddenly...”

Rachel walked up to us, peering down at me. “Your face is pretty pale, Lyle.”

“He did push himself pretty far,” Sophia commented. “Anyways, how are we going to transport all this metal back to camp?”

I could vaguely hear the rest of them respond to her question, but their voices kept fading more and more into the distance. The all-too-familiar sensation of my consciousness drifting away slithered into me once again.

Why, oh why, do I have to grow used to this? I demanded the darkness behind my eyelids. *Really, I’m passing out cold, again?!*

But try as I might, I had no means to fight off my exhaustion.

“It was good...while it lasted,” I mumbled.

And with those final words, I gave in and drifted away.

Chapter 41: At Instruction's End

Moments after Lyle's party had conquered the dungeon, all the other adventurers had poured inside, the Guild staff at their backs. Wagons had followed along after them, waiting on standby to transport the large amount of rarium that had been discovered after the giant worm had been killed.

It wasn't long before Hawkins found himself stepping into the innermost chamber, coming to a standstill as he stared at the body of the giant worm. A pained look came over his face as he eyed the monster's sprawling form, noticing something reflective inside its stomach. He walked over, then crouched down and carefully collected the gleaming objects. Hawkins's hand clenched tight around them—around the seven Guild cards, their owners all marked dead by the lines scratched through their names.

"I didn't think something like this would happen this time," he said softly.

The Guild had been careful to choose parties that exceeded the skill level required for this expedition. They'd managed to put together a decent selection of adventurers, even though all the most skilled parties had already left to tackle one of the other dungeons.

It was going so well, Hawkins thought, heart aching. We made it so close to the end, and yet...

And yet, several adventurers had still died—eight of them, in fact.

As Hawkins rose back to his feet, Zelphy walked up to his side. "Hawkins, boss. I need to tell you a few things."

He nodded, then turned toward her. "Your party may have disobeyed orders, but no one can deny the fact that you managed to rescue three of our comrades too. I'll put a report in to the higher-ups and do what I can. However...the Guild may still decide to use your party's insubordination as an excuse to claim a percentage of your treasure."

Rarium was in very high demand, so much so that the scarce supplies

available were always running low. It was only natural that the Guild would thirst after such a rare material—even to the point that they’d make use of every opportunity they had to get their hands on it. It was highly likely that they’d demand Lyle and his party buy the Guild’s silence by giving the staff a portion of the precious metal they’d gathered.

Zelphy didn’t seem to care about any of it, though. “I don’t mind,” she said, eyes distant. “If that’s all it takes to quiet them down, then fine. Also...I’m done. I’m retiring.”

Hawkins twitched a little in surprise. *She doesn’t look particularly injured*, he thought. *So why is she saying she wants to retire...? Could she feel responsible for—?*

Hawkins couldn’t stand the thought. “Miss Zelphy, please know that this matter wasn’t your fault. You don’t have to take responsibility, truly—”

“You’ve got me all wrong,” Zelphy said, holding up a hand. “I don’t feel guilty, it’s just...I guess I’ve lost my motivation. I’ve got no more confidence that I can go on. It’s like...I’ve lost my reason for adventuring.”

Hawkins looked at her for a long moment, then sighed. *Losing a veteran will be rough for the Guild, but Zelphy has her own life to lead.*

“Very well,” he told her. “I’ll put that in my report. But I ask that you please inform Lord Bentler yourself.”

Zelphy wasn’t just a Guild adventurer—she had ties to Lord Bentler as well. If she really wanted to quit, she’d need his permission along with the Guild’s.

“Yeah, I’ll tell him,” Zelphy agreed.

The rest of the adventurers were hard at work stripping the giant worm of its materials and extracting its Demonic Stone. Since it was a boss, the Stone was huge—practically the size of an adult man’s clenched fist—and gave off a strong radiance.

Despite this, the most notable sight was still Lyle.

“He’s, err...grown into quite a fine adventurer,” Hawkins said with a wry smile. His eyes followed Sophia as she walked by, carrying Lyle in her arms like

he was a princess. Despite carrying the unconscious boy, her back was plastered with heavy bags that contained their rarium harvest.

That boy has achieved some pretty incredible things, Hawkins thought, *amused, but his finish is still quite sloppy.*

Zelphy glanced at where Hawkins was looking and laughed. “He’s my disciple, for whatever that’s worth. I’ll be prancing around with my head high once he gets famous—I am the one who trained him, after all.”

Zelphy left moments later, and Hawkins and his team got back to disassembling the giant worm.

Before long, Hawkins and his team completed their tasks in the dungeon, and it was time to head out.

Hawkins walked through the area once everyone else had left, confirming that no one had lingered behind, then finally stepped through the dungeon’s entrance. The moment he was through, the gateway of twisted branches rapidly aged, withered, rotted, crumbled, and then vanished altogether. The dungeon was just a normal forest once more.

Now then, Hawkins thought, *striding purposefully toward the camp, I’ll have to report to them too.*

“Them” being the adventurers that had been sent from Central.

Hawkins made his way to their tent, which was easy to find. It stood out from the rest of the campsite, since it was more luxurious by far than any of the tents the other adventurers were using.

Hawkins quickly went inside and gave the adventurers his report, doing his best to ignore how they grimaced when they heard of Lyle’s arbitrary actions. Thankfully, that seemed like it was to be both the beginning and end of their negative response.

“That should be everything,” Hawkins finally told them.

The leader of the Central adventurers gave a slight nod and said, “Dealing with all that must have been hard on you. You can leave; we’ve heard enough.”

His tone was condescending and his attitude was grandiose, but Hawkins left unperturbed.

It was just, on the way out, he heard something rather strange...

One of the Central adventurers had said: "All right, now we can return to Central before *they* arrive..."

The sentence pricked at something in his brain, but Hawkins still had an entire mountain of work to get done. He dove into one of his many tasks, not bothering to dwell too deeply on the man's words.

Now that the subjugation was over, we headed off to return to Darion for the first time in what felt like an age. What awaited us there was...well, paperwork. *Piles* of it.

The Guild leadership had rounded us up once we'd gotten back to Darion, issuing us a censure for our willful misconduct. They'd ruled that we had to present twenty percent of the rarium we'd gotten from the dungeon to them as punishment, and then topped it off by demanding that we sell them the rest at a thirty percent discount. Sure, we'd ended up making a small fortune, but that didn't satisfy me one bit.

It's not like the Guild is blameless in what happened, I thought, irritated.

I blew out a breath, forcibly focusing my attention back on the various documents laying out in front of me. I was in my room at the inn, sitting at the small desk that had come with the room.

"So, um..." I muttered, "we can go ahead and sell the chest loot altogether... We don't have to worry about Rondo's party, since they already took their cut in goods with Ralph's gauntlets, that ring, and some rarium..."

I'd realized soon after our return that our dungeon diving had been a rousing success, even before we'd sold a single item. A large part of that success was thanks to the help of Rondo and his party, so I'd asked the rest of my party what they thought about giving the trio a bit of a bonus. Novem, Aria, and Sophia had all agreed that it was a good idea. Zelphy must have been busy, since she hadn't attended that particular discussion.

But even with that decided, there were still plenty of matters to be taken care of. The fourth head was the most skilled of my ancestors when it came to paperwork, so he'd been instructing me on how to handle the finer details. His instructing was a bit too close to scolding for my taste, though. Not to mention that he had so many things to say that he inevitably came off as annoying.

"Lyle," he burst out, "you've got a few different cases of that item. It would be good for you to see how much it'll sell for individually, but if you sell it as a bundle, that'll give you an excuse to charge them a 'convenience fee.' *Oh*, and don't forget to categorize each item. In some cases, you'll have an easier time walking around with a piece of treasure than hauling around its worth in coins. You should consider securing some for yourself too, and—"

As the fourth head had been rambling along, I'd remembered our biggest find from the expedition—the peridot. I took it out and placed it on the table, sending the fourth head into a pondering silence.

"The biggest problem is what we're going to do with this," I told him, crossing my arms thoughtfully. "I'm sure I can find a buyer for it if we'd like, and there's always the option of putting it up for auction. Rondo said I should just take it to reimburse myself after all my extravagant spending, but..."

"Well," the fourth head said slowly, "the first step is always investigating the marke— Aaaaaah!!!"

I jerked up from my chair. "Wh-What's wrong?!"

"Lyle, did you ever give something to Aria? I wasn't able to check in on you for a while after that last battle, but you *must* have at least tried to give her a thoughtful present during that time frame, right?!"

My brow wrinkled. *Come to think of it, I was so exhausted from the battle that I was bedridden for two days. Everyone else took care of the stuff leading up to our departure—I didn't even help with disassembling the tent or anything. And...* I winced. *I do not recall giving Aria any presents.*

"Actually, no...I didn't give her anything."

I had prepared for the fourth head to let out another shriek of horror, but was shocked when the cry came from the fifth head instead. He normally wasn't the

type to rant at me over stuff like this.

“You fool!” the fifth head snarled. “Get out of this room and take care of that right now! It doesn’t matter what you do, just do *something*! Give her an item that she can easily carry around—come on, you have to have at least one thing that’ll work!”

I glanced down at the gemstone in my hand. “Th-Then...how about this?”

“That’s overdoing it,” the fifth head replied, completely missing the fact that I’d been joking. “Just how much do you think that thing is worth? And it’s peridot, unfortunately. Even if Aria’s okay with it, I don’t know what the others would think...”

I cocked my head, curiously. “But I thought women liked precious stones...?”

“Well, of course,” the fifth head replied. “I won’t deny that. But peridot, or rather, all gems really, carry certain meanings. Stones have their own language, just like flowers do. Peridot is a gem you give to someone to indicate that you are praying their relationship goes well, or that you wish peace among their household. How do you think Aria will feel, receiving a gem like that? And even if she’s happy about it, what will Novem and Sophia have to say?”

I’d figured that giving Aria such an expensive gemstone—it was worth at least several hundred gold coins—would just stress her out, but the fifth head gave me another reason I should abstain from giving her such a gift—it would apparently “tip the balance” of the relationships I had with the three girls in Aria’s favor.

“The balance is that important?” I asked the fifth head.

“Yes,” he stressed. “It’s incredibly important. Let me repeat: the balance is more important than you could ever imagine.”

Usually it was the fourth head who had so much to say on topics like this, so the fifth head’s intensity freaked me out a little. I held the peridot up to my eye, staring through it curiously.

“I didn’t know that stones had meanings too,” I commented.

“Well, they do,” the seventh head responded. “And, incidentally, peridot is

the birthstone of those born in the eighth month of the year. As far as I remember, Aria's birthday is not in August."

I tucked the peridot into my bag, finally letting go of the idea that it might work as a present. *I guess a stone like this just isn't well suited to that sort of thing*, I thought.

"Do I have anything small around here to give her?" I wondered aloud. "Something like that duranta flower I gave Sophia?"

I took Novem out on a picnic, and I gave Sophia a flower... I thought. *So what can I do for Aria...?*

I still hadn't come to a conclusion when I heard a knock on my door. I called out to the person on the other side, and the voice that responded was Aria's, so I just invited her inside.

"Something wrong?" I asked her.

"U-Um, uh...it's...well, it's about my payment. I was hoping to receive it in advance. I know you haven't sold the loot yet, but I need it. I'd like, err...four gold coins, by tomorrow. And also...I have another request."

Tomorrow's the day our contract with Zelphy ends, I realized. *We're supposed to meet with her on the last day and give her an evaluation of her work.*

At the end of every task, an adventurer would receive a letter grade, which indicated how well they'd done the job. There were five ranks: A, B, C, D, and E. However...it would be more accurate to say there were four ranks, B being the highest. This was because, if you gave an adventurer an A grade, the client would be responsible for paying that adventurer a bonus for their hard work. This meant that As were rarely handed out, if ever.

"It looks like Zelphy's going to retire after our instructional period is over," Aria went on, "and start building a family. I wanted to give her something to celebrate, but she said she didn't need it..."

Ah, I get it, I thought. *Aria wants to pay Zelphy a bonus, so she can congratulate her on her marriage.*

If she wanted to give Zelphy a reward, this was a good way to do it. Aria

would lose out on a bit of the gold, since the Guild would take a cut, but some of the money would still make its way to Zelphy in a way she couldn't turn down.

"Oh my!" the third exclaimed cheerfully from the Jewel. "This is your chance! You can get Aria in your debt, *and* completely write off that present."

You're terrible, I thought.

Apparently, the other ancestors agreed with me.

"*Dude*," the second head muttered in disgust.

The fourth head sighed. "You're the worst."

"Yeah," the fifth head agreed. "How could you even consider that?"

"I see," the sixth head said sarcastically. "So you're paying her off, but out of self-interest rather than goodwill..."

The seventh head put his head in his hands. "I always knew there was something off about you."

"Oh, come on," the third head said, lowering his voice. "I'm certain the thought occurred to more than a few of you. If Lyle says yes, this would make them totally even!" He fell into silence for a moment, and then burst out, "You know, I think it's worse to pretend you're a good person when you're not! You're going to tell me I'm wrong for being honest?! Like any of you are any better."

My ancestors fell completely silent. The mood in the Jewel was overcome by a pall of embarrassed horror.

I, however, remained completely unaffected. *I don't have any reason I can think of to deny Aria's request...* I mused. *But, still...*

"I can't pay you in advance," I told her.

Aria's shoulders drooped. "Lyle, please! Even if you have to cut down my share because of it, that's fine!"

"*But...*" I said, clearing my throat. "If you'd like Zelphy to receive a bonus from the entire party, then I'll consider it."

Aria's head jerked back up.

I shot her a smile, then continued, "Yes, why don't we make it a gold coin per person? Or otherwise we can do two coins from you, and two from me. How does that sound?"

Joy broke out over her face. "It sounds perfect! Thank you, Lyle!"

After that, Aria returned to her own inn, and I headed out into the city, looking for something to add a little more pep to my step. I was feeling a little worn down after staring at all that paperwork for so long—my eyes were tired, and my stomach was starting to growl. I had just started to prowl my way through a group of food stalls when I spotted a familiar face amongst the crowd.

Is that...Eva?!

"Huh?" I said blankly, blinking in surprise.

Eva turned around, hearing my voice, and I gave her a grin. "If it isn't Eva," I drawled. "What brings you here today?"

"Lyle," she cried, grinning back. She rushed over to where I was standing, throwing her arms around me and locking me in her embrace. "Save me!"

"Uh, what...?" I said, laughing in confusion.

Eva let me go and backed off, clutching at her stomach with a pathetic look on her face. My ears were soon hit with the cute—well, maybe cute wasn't the right word—growling of her stomach. After that, it wasn't too hard for me to guess the general situation.

I grabbed Eva by the hand, leading her behind a food stall with an outdoor dining area scattered with a selection of plain tables and chairs. I chose a table at random, then ordered a few dishes to share between the two of us.

It wasn't long before the meal arrived, and Eva's eyes lit up just looking at it.

"You really helped me out there," she said, shooting me a happy smile as she tackled the food in front of her. "My expenses have really been piling up, and let me tell you, it *has not* been a good time."

My whole face wrinkled up in disbelief. “I happen to recall paying you quite a handsome amount,” I told her. “*Quite* high, considering it was just payment for spreading rumors, performing onstage, and whatnot.”

“Oh,” she said lightly, eyes drifting to the side. “You did, didn’t you? Well, I’ve got my necessities, okay? Stage costumes, and makeup, and...all kinds of stuff. And once I had everything, it just happened to turn out that my pockets were empty.”

She tapped at her head in a cutesy, airheaded way, as if to say, “Whoops, silly me!” and went straight back to eating. With the speed she was going at it, we weren’t going to have nearly enough food between us.

I called a server over and put in another order, watching Eva scrounge through her things and pull out a notepad as I did so.

“Sooo...I heard about what happened in the dungeon, but I never got your side of the story. I wanna know all the juicy details of how you defeated that giant worm. Like, what did you do when you were in its stomach? How did you feel when you were doing it?”

She is an elf, after all, I thought. Of course she wants to hear the story.

After I’d defeated the giant worm, I’d ended up bedridden for the last few days of the expedition. Apparently Eva had left the camp disappointed, since she hadn’t been able to hear my side of things.

“Couldn’t you have just asked Novem that stuff?” I asked, not really getting why it was such a big deal.

Eva shook her head. “That wouldn’t do me any good. *You* were the key player, Lyle.” She leaned back in her chair. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure to cut out all the humiliating parts—like how Sophia was princess-carrying you around the whole battle, and had to toss you in the giant worm’s mouth like a sack of potatoes.”

My eyes darted to the side as I let out a dry laugh.

I see, I thought, amused. This isn’t a plea—it’s a veiled threat.

Telling Eva everything that had happened didn’t seem like too high a price to get her to keep my pathetic side a secret, though, so I just shrugged and agreed.

I laid it all out for her as we ate, and by the time the meal ended, she was in high spirits.

“All right!” she cheered, pumping a fist. “That’s that settled. Now I don’t have anything left to keep me here.”

I propped my head on a fist. “Are you planning on going somewhere?”

Eva nodded. “I thought I’d go on a tour of the west. I already struck a deal with a troupe—a different one than the one I traveled with to get to Darion. Actually, today’s the day I bid the city adieu.” She shot me a megawatt grin. “Still, I get the feeling we’ll meet again. Or would you prefer I say that fate will bring us back together?”

I hope she’s right, I thought. I don’t want this to be the last time we see each other.

I opened my mouth to bid her farewell, but then stopped. Something about the phrase just didn’t feel right.

“I don’t like saying goodbye,” I told Eva instead. “Let’s just say, ‘Until next time.’”

“All righty then,” she said, shooting me a wink. “Until next time, then.”

Once Eva was gone, my ancestors’ voices immediately erupted within my head. After overhearing a conversation like that, I should have known they wouldn’t let me hear the end of it. The third head was particularly terrible.

“Looks like you’re getting better at handling girls,” he commented. “Maybe because of that Art of yours? Still, the level of impatience you showed in that fight against the giant worm put all your immaturity on display.”

My mind shifted to my Art—Experience. I knew it increased the experience I gained, but I still didn’t know how effective it was, or what “experience” really meant.

I lowered my voice so that none of the diners around me could hear, then whispered, “We were really racing against time back then, so of course I’d be impatient. Plus, I had to figure things out practically on my own, since a certain

group of people who kept assuring me everything would be all right turned out to have never fought a monster like that before.”

I'd love it if you six put yourself in my shoes, I thought at them crankily. *There I was, convinced everything was going to be fine, only to be forced into a battle where everything nearly went to hell.*

At least, I *thought* it had nearly gone to hell, but my ancestors' reactions seemed strangely off on that point.

A realization seemed to hit the second head. “Lyle,” he explained slowly, “it’s true that you stimulated the dungeon back then, but you still had a significant period of time before it actually descended into a frenzy.”

“What?!”

The third head chuckled. “He’s right. You would have had plenty of time to slowly whittle away at that giant worm until it went down. You guys would have been fine. I thought you knew that and you’d just gotten impatient, but apparently I was mistaken.”

So...I just came up with all those assumptions on my own? I thought incredulously.

“Well, the mood was there,” the fifth head said lightly. He seemed to have accepted my ignorance and moved past it already. “And anyway, we did play along to some extent.”

I slapped both my hands over my face, suddenly overcome with embarrassment. “You could have said something,” I moaned through my fingers.

I did all that stuff, and we could have just fought it normally...

“I didn’t think you’d get so carried away,” the second head said, starting to laugh. “What’s it matter, anyway? You still won. And honestly, I think you did amazingly well, coordinating with Aria and Sophia on the fly like that.”

Yeah, we won, but I ended up unconscious in Sophia’s arms at the end! The whole camp saw me like that! I gave a little groan of despair. *Why can’t they understand how I feel...?*

In the end, I had to let it go, but the embarrassment still lingered.

So we could have won even if I didn't push myself...? Seriously...?

The day after my talk with Eva, my party and I headed over to one of the Guild's meeting rooms, where we were to evaluate Zelphy's work with Hawkins presiding over us. As her clients, we had an obligation to give her our verdict on her performance now that her job was over. Such things were considered important, since the grade an adventurer received for their work had a direct effect on their reward.

Most of the time adventurers were the ones getting evaluated, rather than the other way around. When they decided to work together—as we had with Rondo's party—those agreements were typically made outside of the Guild, since that enabled both parties to avoid the commission fee the Guild charged for its assistance.

Once we'd all gotten settled into our own seats around the table, Hawkins stood and announced: "As of today, your instructional period is over. Please fill out your evaluation of Zelphy's performance on this form."

I glanced over at Novem, Sophia, and finally Aria. All three of them nodded in approval, and without further ado, I scribbled down an A.

Hawkins took the paper with a slight smile. "If you give an adventurer an A grade, that means you, as their employer, are required to pay them a bonus reward. Are you still certain you'd like to proceed? You'll need to provide at least an extra twenty percent of the price of the initial reward."

I nodded, placing four gold coins on the table. Altogether, they added up to twenty percent of Zelphy's original mentorship price.

Zelphy stared down at the coins blankly, like she didn't know quite what to say. Her face turned stiff, and she lifted a hand to scratch at her hair.

"Just give me a B and be done with it," she insisted, tone stilted and awkward.

"I hear you're planning on retiring," I said, looking her straight in the eye. "And that you've just gotten married too. Since you won't accept any gifts straight from us, this seemed like the best way to go about it."

Zelphy begrudgingly took two of the gold coins as Hawkins silently processed the paperwork. The other two coins she left behind, since the Guild would be taking them for their share.

“Zelphy,” I said sincerely, “thank you for everything.”

Novem bowed her head respectfully. “You’ve been a big help to us. I think you deserve the A.”

“I know I only joined partway through,” Sophia said, her voice a bit strained. “But, uh...thank you for your guidance. I know I must have been a nuisance to deal with...”

I smiled slightly, remembering how when Sophia had joined our party, she’d manage to get an E grade on one of her missions. It was the lowest possible evaluation an adventurer could possibly receive. The situation had been so bad that Zelphy had had to go around apologizing on her behalf.

Aria opened her mouth, about to say her piece, but Zelphy turned and stormed out the door. She didn’t give any of us a second glance.

“Zelphy!” Aria cried, lurching up from her seat. She took a step forward, but Hawkins waved her to a stop.

“Let her go,” he told her. “Zelphy probably just doesn’t want you to see her upset.”

But that was the last thing he should have said. Aria’s lips quivered, and she went tearing out of the room after the older woman.

“Mister Hawkins, this might not be the best time,” I said hesitantly, “but I have something I’d like to ask you.”

He nodded, and after I explained what I was after, quickly prepared the necessary paperwork for me. When he was done, he handed me the form I’d asked for, the one which I’d have to give the Guild in order for us to leave Darion and set up shop elsewhere.

“You’re in a unique position, Lyle,” he said, shaking my hand. “I understand all too well why you’ve made this decision. Still, we’ll be sad to see you go. I’ll be looking forward to hearing about all the accomplishments you’re going to

make.”

I stared at him for a long moment, feeling oddly emotional. Back when I’d first seen Hawkins, I’d been tempted to avoid his counter at the reception desk, just like a lot of the other adventurers. But this muscular, fierce-looking man had turned out to be a hell of a receptionist.

“I’m the one who should be saying that I’ll miss you, not the other way around,” I told him with a smile. “You’ve done nothing but do your best to help us since the moment we registered. Seriously...thank you.”

Zelphy hurried down the Guild corridor, each breath catching in her chest. All she wanted to do was escape, but she wasn’t fast enough—Aria was at her heels within seconds. The younger girl lunged forward and wrapped her arms around Zelphy from behind, bringing her to a lurching stop.

“Zelphy...” Aria sobbed into her back, “I know all those things that happened with my house must have made your life a mess...but still you...you did so much for me. I just wanted to thank you, but you wouldn’t even let me celebrate such a big moment in your life with you, so I just...I went to Lyle, and—”

“I won’t say it wasn’t a hassle,” Zelphy managed, her voice quavering, “but I’ve still managed to live a pretty fulfilling life. So you don’t have to apologize...milady.”

Zelphy swiped a hand across her face, dashing away her tears. She turned in Aria’s arms, embracing her head-on. “I wanted to keep caring for you a bit longer,” she said softly, “But now, I...”

I’m gonna have my hands full with my own life now, and besides, I’ve got little left to teach you. I’ll just have to watch your star rise from a distance from now on.

“It’s all right, Zelphy. Thank you for all you’ve done for me. And now...I’ll be heading off with Lyle.”

Zelphy nodded at that, even though in her heart of heart’s she wished Aria would stay. *It would have been so nice, living a quiet, peaceful life by your side in this city,* Zelphy thought sadly.

If she was being honest, Zelphy would've told Aria she didn't think it was a good idea for her to run off with Lyle. But at the same time, she couldn't deny Aria's talent.

The world oughta know milady's name, Zelphy thought fondly. She's got a helluva lot more talent than me. Shutting her away in a city like Darion just wouldn't be right. But, still...

Leaving her with Lyle was a prospect that brought her both relief and concern.

"Feel free to come crying back when you fall out of love," Zelphy teased Aria with a slight smile. "I'll talk things through with the lord and get you a place to live."

Aria sniffled, managing a wobbly smile through her tears. "I'll be *fine*, Zelphy. I promise. And...sorry for everything. Thank you."

Zelphy curled her arms harder around Aria, burying her face in her shoulder. And finally, she let herself sob.

As Aria and Zelphy said their goodbyes, I'd lingered at the Guild, filling out all the forms we needed to file before heading to our next destination. It had taken me a while, but now everything was set for us to move out. Both our Guild cards and a transfer form rested safely in one of my bags, ready to be submitted to the Guild of whatever town we decided to settle at next.

My next destination, I'd be going to alone. I passed all my bags to Novem and headed to Ciel; Rondo and Ralph had told me they'd be waiting for me inside.

It really doesn't look like a sweet shop at all, I thought when I arrived at the front of the store. But of course, the proprietors did that on purpose. Otherwise all their male customers would have a hard time convincing themselves to go inside.

I stepped through the door, and several women in cute frilly uniforms immediately welcomed me. They recognized me pretty much right away, and led me to Rondo and Ralph's table without me even having to ask.

It's nice, being treated like a regular, I thought with a grin.

“Oh, you’re finally here!” Ralph said, glancing up from the menu he was looking over with shining eyes.

Rondo gave me a wry smile. “Sorry about this. Ralph insisted that we just *had* to celebrate here.”

“We’re all getting together at the bar tomorrow,” Ralph protested, “so what’s wrong with meeting up here today? I need to try everything on the menu before I leave, or I’ll never be satisfied.”

I grabbed a chair and sat down, then asked, “You’re really leaving Darion, then?”

Rondo nodded. “We are. Darion’s a fine place, but we need to move on to somewhere else if we ever want to become first-rate adventurers.”

Oh, I thought, a pang shooting through my chest. *Seems like they’ve got it all planned out.*

“Our next stop’s Auran,” Ralph added. “We’ve already upgraded all our stuff—I had a spear made with that rarium you shared with us, Rachel got herself a staff, and Rondo—”

“I had them upgrade my sword,” Rondo chimed in. “And while I was at it...” He set an item on the table with a flourish—it was a dagger close in design to the sword he typically wielded. “I had them engrave a defensive Art into this, since I don’t have a shield. We had frontline Arts engraved into Ralph’s spear, and a handful of rearguard ones into Rachel’s staff. All combined, I think we’re prepared enough to make our move.”

I felt a little frisson of discomfort go through me. Way back when I’d been about to leave my house for the last time, our gardener, Zel, had mentioned Auran. He’d said it was a gathering place for mercenaries and adventurers.

“It’s pretty dangerous in Auran though, isn’t it?” I asked, keeping my voice light. “Especially since you don’t have that many members...”

“Well, normally I’d agree with you,” Ralph agreed, “but we’ve got some experience under our belts now, and we’re all equipped with Demonic Tools. That makes us pretty accomplished, as far as adventurers are concerned.”

Rondo nodded and continued, “We haven’t gotten ourselves upgraded armor yet, but that’s only because we heard they’ve got a better selection in Auran. The Demonic Tools alone should make a big difference for us on the battlefield, so I thought we might as well get them out of the way first.” He shot me a reassuring smile. “We should be able to solve our party member problem in Auran too. We can take advantage of all the work they have available for adventurers there and make a name for ourselves, which will help us recruit. There should be plenty of work for us to pick up, since the city’s near the border and their knights and soldiers have their hands full dealing with foes from opposing nations.”

Looks like they’ve got different goals, different plans than we do, I thought. So...I guess this’ll have to be goodbye.

But Rondo leaned forward and grinned, unaffected by the sadness leaching into me. “Ultimately, we’re planning on aiming for the Free City of Baym. You’re going to head there with your party too, right?”

I nodded, and he held out a hand for me to shake. “Then how about we have ourselves a little race? The winners’ll be whoever manages to become first-rate adventurers first, and beats the other group to Baym!”

That’s right, I remembered suddenly. I told the founder that was my goal—to become a first-rate adventurer, and journey to Baym.

I reached out and shook Rondo’s hand, some of my melancholy fading away. “Rondo...that sounds great. Let’s meet again in Baym.” I turned and shot Ralph a smile. “That goes for you too, of course!”

“Well, naturally,” Ralph said, laughing. “But Lyle...we’re not gonna meet up with you and find out you’ve recruited even more girls, right?”

“Wha—? No! I’m not trying to just recruit girls, I promise! Any capable guy that wants to join up is welcome too!”

Rondo laughed, and we moved on to other subjects as we placed our orders. For the rest of our time together, we talked about all our plans for the future, our dreams, and a bunch of other silly, stupid things.

That night, I dropped by the round-table room inside the Jewel. I stood before all six of my ancestors, their eyes locked on my face, as I informed them of my upcoming plans.

“I think I’ll take the party with me to the Academic City of Aramthurst, so we can take advantage of all their training halls and the private lessons they offer. I’ve heard it’s a good place to gather comrades too.”

I’d looked into Aramthurst a little after Novem and I talked, and had found that it was a famous adventurer recruitment hub. The adventurers who went there to polish their craft were often on the lookout for better parties, or at least ones that better suited their needs.

“There’s nothing wrong with heading to Auran with Rondo’s party, you know,” the second head said, clearly surprised by my decision.

“Yeah,” the third head agreed. “Honestly, that’s where I thought you’d say you were going. I thought you’d stick with your friends, now that you finally made some.”

I couldn’t deny that I’d thought about it. The three of them had even made a point to invite me along for the ride. But, in the end...I’d decided Aramthurst was the best choice for me.

Rondo’s party had decided to go to Auran because it was a good place to get stronger. The city was home to many mercenaries and adventurers, and the work mainly involved hunting down monsters. But though Auran offered many ways to advance your skills via combat, Aramthurst had its own merits. Going there would allow us to expand our skill sets by training in more advanced, specialized areas. We’d also be able to search for new party members to add to our team who already had those advanced skills.

I may have learned the basics in Darion, but advancing my skills is essential if I want to continue expanding my abilities.

With this in mind, I told my ancestors, “Even so, I’ve decided Aramthurst is the best choice for us. In the end, even though both of our parties want to focus on getting stronger, the way we want to go about that goal differs. We’ll see each other again, I’m sure of it—and anyway, we already made plans to meet up once we all reach Baym.”

“Good for you, Lyle,” the fourth head said. “Making a measured decision like that is much more respectable than just going with the flow. You could have easily just let it sweep you up and deposit you in Auran.”

The fifth head nodded in agreement. “You’ve got some financial leeway, though, so you should probably stop by Central before heading to Aramthurst.”

Rondo’s party didn’t have that sort of leeway anymore, since they’d spent a good hunk of the money they’d earned at the dungeon on equipment once they’d come back. They’d told me they planned to purchase even more protective gear once they reached Auran. It wasn’t like they were impoverished now though—they’d just have to start prioritizing earning money sooner rather than later.

We were in a similar situation, but we didn’t have to worry as much about our spending, since we didn’t need to invest in entirely new sets of weapons and armor. Two of our members already wielded family heirlooms—Novem with her staff and Sophia with her axe—and pricey Demonic Tools were useless to Aria, since her red Gem shorted out their abilities. I was no different—as long as I had the Jewel, Demonic Tools were out of my reach. The most I’d be buying myself was a high-quality weapon.

That being said, my main goal was to use the time our extra wiggle room gave us to pick up some skills in Aramthurst, before we had to go back to work again.

“The ‘Academic City,’ eh?” muttered the sixth head, who didn’t sound nearly as excited as the others. “Doesn’t sound like much fun. Maybe you should reconsider, Lyle.”

“I think you’ve had enough fun already, Dad,” the seventh head said with a sigh. “Anyways, Lyle, I’m glad you’ve started thinking about your future. But when I think about how it’s all because you decided to become a top adventurer...I can’t say I’m looking forward to watching it play out.”

Looks like he’s still irked that I decided to become an adventurer of all things, I thought, chuckling a little. Their opinions never change.

I realized I was unconsciously waiting for one more voice to speak up and offer his opinion, but it never came.

What would the founder say to me if he was here...? I wondered, feeling abruptly lonely without him.

I pondered and pondered the question as I stared at the greatsword floating over the round table, but didn't come up with any satisfactory answers.

Chapter 42: The Promise

“This is pretty inconvenient, don’tcha think?” Ralph muttered, his new spear shifting against his shoulder. His precious gauntlets glinted around his wrists under the clear, blue sky. “Someone oughta at least try and make traveling from one wagon train to another easier.”

The party had disembarked from their first wagon train to Auran not too long ago, and were now trudging their way along the side of the highway until they reached a town where they could charter their next one.

“I mean, we’re near the border,” Rachel said. She held her new staff clenched in one of her hands. “Bad roads are par for the course. They’re leaving it this way on purpose, so it makes travel more difficult for any enemies that make it through our defenses.”

It’s true that having good roads around these parts would only aid an enemy invasion, Rondo thought, but I can’t help but think the roads are this badly maintained for another reason.

“It does take a lot of money just to maintain the border, though,” Rondo said gently, taking care not to come on too strong and anger Rachel with his contradictory opinion. “The lords responsible for the area might not have enough funds to keep up both. We can ask around when we reach Auran and see if we can figure out the truth.”

They continued chatting as they walked and walked, making steady progress down the highway. After a while, they noticed a puff of sand and dust hovering in the air in the distance.

It wouldn’t take much to kick up that big of a cloud in this area, Rondo thought. The sun’s beating down on the ground here so hard it’s all gone bone dry.

“Looks like it’s a carriage,” he told the other two. “Let’s move to the side.”

As they shuffled over, Ralph took a look at the oncoming group of people and

gave a long whistle. “That’s a hell of a procession right there. You think it’s a noble? I mean, who else would bring a whole entourage like that with them?”

Best to not get on their bad side, if we’re dealing with nobles, Rondo thought. He moved from the side of the road all the way off into the dirt a few feet away. *We should just wait here until they’re gone.*

“Hey, guys! Don’t stare too hard. C’mon, both of you get over here too.”

The carriage rumbled closer and closer, and Rondo couldn’t help but blink in shock as he took in the sheer number of knights on horseback that rode around it. There were even more soldiers trailing behind on foot, guarding a group of wagons.

That’s some heavy security, he thought, a bit awed. *With a company of that scale, the noble must be an earl at least.*

Rondo had originally hailed from a noble household before he’d become an adventurer, so he was more knowledgeable about that sort of thing than the other two.

Granted, my family’s status wasn’t even close to that of an earl’s, he thought wryly.

The carriage came rumbling up right next to them, and Rondo relaxed a little as the three of them waited for the group of travelers to pass, but then...the carriage came to a stop. It had only gone a measly few feet past the spot where his party stood.

What’s...that about...?

Rondo stared warily at the luxurious door of the luxurious carriage, his brain noting idly that the vehicle looked like it had come from the south. That’s when the door swung right open; and through the portal appeared the silhouette of a lone girl.

A nearby knight held out a hand to aid her descent, and she took it delicately, her blue eyes scouring over the three frozen figures on the side of the road. Her blonde hair, decorated with a ribbon, bounced as she leapt from the carriage to the ground. She wore a coat over her white dress, and looked oddly overdressed for the sweltering heat.

A cold chill had begun to inch through Rondo's body the moment he saw her, even despite the sun's burning rays.

Wh-What...what's going on here?! he thought wildly. He didn't notice, but his hands had begun to quiver.

The girl took several steps toward them, a smile flickering over her face as she stared at Rondo. She didn't even glance at Rachel or Ralph by his side.

"My, you there," she said lightly. "You have the most *wonderful* eyes."

No matter how he tried, Rondo couldn't muster a response. "Ah," he mumbled, "err..."

"Lady Ceres has addressed you," snapped the knight at the girl's side. His gaze pierced into Rondo like a sharpened dagger. "You *dare* hold your silence?"

The girl giggled. "Stand down, Alfred. Look at how you've gotten him shaking! Don't you feel bad for him?"

"Yes, ma'am!" the knight cried, his hand immediately leaving the hilt of his blade. "I apologize."

Would he...have really cut me down for something like that? Rondo wondered. He looked down at his hands, only now realizing how violently he was shaking.

"Rondo?" Rachel asked, looking at him anxiously. "What's wrong?"

"Yeah, what's up with you?" Ralph jumped in. There wasn't a trace of fear on his face.

It seemed they'd both completely failed to keep up with the situation—and unfortunately, so had Rondo. But Rondo still had his sense of danger, which functioned at a much higher level than Ralph's.

"My name is Ceres," the girl declared, her right hand pressed to her chest. "Ceres Walt. And you, sir...I've taken a liking to you. Come, I'll let you be my pet."

"Wh-What are you talking about...?" Rondo asked. His mind spun, but he just couldn't comprehend what she was trying to say.

Ceres looked at him blankly, more curious than surprised. Then, she pressed her index finger to her lips.

It's...like I'm being drawn in, Rondo thought, trying to pull his eyes away. But alas, they seemed locked on the girl's pouting mouth.

"Ohhh? Are you perhaps resisting me? Yes, it's rare, but it happens from time to time. Why, just the other day, there were those two Circry girls. A shame, I quite liked Miranda..." Ceres reached out, smiling as she stroked a hand over Rondo's face. "Not that that has anything to do with you."

Rachel, being Rondo's girlfriend, wasn't appreciative at all at such a move. "Hey!" she interjected, but Ceres didn't even spare her a glance.

"Kids who don't get charmed right away are often quite talented, you know," she crooned at Rondo. "I like you even more now. I'll let you stay by my side."

Fear flooded Rondo's body. He felt off, like he was going to kneel at her feet at any moment. And slowly, slowly, her face was growing more and more beautiful right in front of his eyes...

No! No, I can't! I can't...break my promise! I can't betray myself that way!

All of a sudden, Rondo felt like his mind cleared a little. He remembered the promise he'd given Lyle, how they'd shaken hands and vowed to do their best to become first-rate adventurers. Reaching that status was his dream—it was one that his entire party shared, along with Lyle's.

"I...I apologize, but I must decline," Rondo said, finally able to form a coherent sentence. He reached out and softly pushed Ceres's hand from his face. "Me and my party...we have something else we must do."

The smile vanished from Ceres's face. "I see...so you won't be mine. Very well, then. *Disappear.*"

The knight beside Ceres drew his sword, and Ralph charged at him head-on. He had his spear in his hands, its metal gleaming as he held it out to block the knight's swing.

"Rondo! Take Rachel and run!" he yelled.

Rondo hurriedly drew his own sword. "Ralph, I—!"

Pain shot through him, and the world went a little fuzzy. Rondo glanced down at his right arm, which had once held his sword. It lay on the ground, cleaved clean off his body. He looked up at Ceres in surprise, his eyes falling on the expensive-looking rapier clutched in her hand.

When...did she get that...?

He looked back at the ground, head spinning. *I just got that sword repaired, and she just...broke it so easily. And...my arm...*

“You’re weaker than I thought,” Ceres said, voice bored. “I must have been wrong about you.”

Now that her interest in him had waned, her eyes turned to Rachel, who’d stopped fleeing to rush back to Rondo’s side. Ceres lazily swung her rapier through the air, and even though Rachel hadn’t even entered the range of her blade, the strike hit.

Rachel let out a keening cry as her staff split in two; a fountain of blood erupted from the front of her body.

“Rachel!” Rondo cried out. He ran to her, scooping her up as best he could with his only remaining arm and holding her close. She was bleeding heavily, her life force pouring out of her in pulses of red liquid. The parched earth sucked up each drop greedily as they fell.

“R-Rondo...?” Rachel murmured, her hand clutching his shirt tightly. He could see the gleam of one of the rings they’d found in the dungeon glistening on her finger. “I...I feel so weak. My eyes, they can’t see you... Hey, Rondo, where are you?! It’s...it’s so...scary...”

She fell silent, coughing as blood poured from her mouth. No matter how hard Rondo pressed down, the blood gushing from her chest wouldn’t stop. Tears poured down Rondo’s face as he clutched her tightly, his eyes turning to Ralph.

The other man floated in the air, thrashing. It was as if he’d been hoisted up by something invisible...and the knight’s saber had been run through his chest.

“Aaah...” Ralph moaned. He spat blood as he squirmed and flailed, until finally his spear fell from his hand and his body fell still. Moments later, his suspended

body was tossed aside.

The knight walked over to Ralph's body, looming over him. "How dare you waste Lady Ceres's time," he spat. "A worthless little small fry like you."

"Oh, it's all right, Alfred." Ceres gave the knight a gentle smile. "Forget about all that and help me into the carriage already. We can't keep father and mother waiting."

"Yes, ma'am!"

The two turned their backs on what was left of Rondo's party and headed for the carriage.

How...how can she smile at a time like this?!

Rachel was already dead—Rondo had felt it the moment her breath stopped puffing against his arm. Ralph lay a few feet away, his body still and unmoving.

Shaking with rage, Rondo gently set Rachel's body down and drew his dagger with his left hand.

"You..." he snarled, "*How could you?!*"

He sprinted in their direction, and the knight's expression grew ugly as he went to draw his blade once more. But Ceres held up a hand, stopping him in his tracks. She turned, that smile still stretched across her face. That terrible, unsightly smile.

Then Rondo was on the ground. Ceres stood over him, a rapier in her right hand and Rondo's dagger in her left.

"Wh-What...?!"

What happened?

Ceres gave a thoughtful little hum. "Looks like this dagger has an Art carved into it. Perhaps I should keep it to give to someone as a reward."

Rondo's mind had gone blank at this point. He stared up at Ceres, then at Alfred. By then, neither had even the slightest interest in him.

"If it came from Lady Ceres's hands, even a pebble would become a priceless heirloom," the knight said respectfully.

“You think so?” Ceres replied. She gave a happy little giggle. “Then I’ll give it to you, Alfred!”

The knight sincerely looked as though he would cry from joy. He fell to one knee, accepting the dagger with two reverently outstretched hands. All the other knights and soldiers ringing Ceres’s caravan looked on, seething with envy.

What the hell’s wrong with these people?! How can they just watch this in silence?!

“This is more happiness than I deserve!” the knight cried, clutching Rondo’s dagger to his chest. “I, Alfred Baden, pledge you my lifelong undying loyalty!”

Ceres got mad at this—in a mild, cutesy way. “Oh, you!” she pouted, smacking him lightly on the chest. “What about father and mother? Say something like that again, and I’ll take the dagger back.”

For how cruel she is, the girl’s got a hell of a strong attachment to her parents, Rondo thought blankly.

“M-My apologies,” the knight stammered. “Naturally, I offer my body to the entirety of House Walt.”

Ceres smiled, clearly pleased, and nodded in approval. “Very good. Now let’s return to the carriage—and fast. Father and mother are looking a bit worried.”

And with that, Alfred handed Ceres back into the carriage and the procession continued, as if nothing had happened at all. A sheet of dust settled over Rachel’s and Ralph’s bodies from the cloud of debris it kicked up.

Once the procession was finally gone, Rondo went to sit up, only to find that he was missing not one arm, but two. There was blood everywhere—he couldn’t be far from bleeding out.

There’s no helping me now, he realized, his heart sinking in despair.

He painstakingly wormed his way across the ground until he was by Rachel’s side again. He grabbed her sleeve in his teeth and pulled with all his might, finally managing to drag her over to Ralph.

Crouching over their bodies on his knees, Rondo sobbed, and bled, and grieved. He memorized the faces of his precious comrades, who had already breathed their last.

“Rachel, Ralph...I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. It wasn’t supposed to be like this... I’m so...so sorry...”

The blood loss hit him then, and his mind started to drift away. He settled down against the earth and thought, *Soon, we’ll just be three bodies lying by the side of the road.*

But he still had more goodbyes to say. “Dad, mom, brother...looks like this is the end for me. I’m sorry I stormed out and left like a brat.” Finally, Rondo’s mind fell on Lyle. “I’m sorry, Lyle...” he mumbled. “I’m sorry I couldn’t keep our promise.”

Rondo closed his eyes, let out one final, deep breath, and fell still.

And just like that, a promising adventuring party’s time was cut anticlimactically short.

Our final days of Darion were closing in when I found myself hit by a sudden pang of loneliness. *I’ll bet it’s because we’re going to leave this city behind soon,* I thought, and brushed it off the best I could.

I’d already finished saying my goodbyes to everyone who’d helped me along the way, but it seemed I was to have one more meeting before I left the city. I’d been summoned to the manor of Baron Bentler Lobernia, Lord of Darion, by a message the man had sent through Zelphy.

Now that I was here, sitting in his office, it appeared he’d called me here to arrange a deal. The conversation had taken a quick turn toward rarium.

“You know, Lyle, I heard something rather interesting about you. Word on the street is you still have quite a bit of rarium left.”

Unfortunately, the rumor was definitely not true. I hadn’t been left with much at all after the Guild had stolen half of our loot and forced us to sell them most of the rest. My stock was actually even smaller than it had been back then,

since I'd given some of the rarium to Rondo and traded away a little more.

"Actually," I told the lord, "I overstepped my bounds and had to sell most of it at a discount. There was also a party that I worked with in order to conquer the dungeon, and I paid a portion of their reward in rarium. To tell you the truth, I have very little rarium left."

I'd actually been considering having a saber forged out of the material once we'd dropped by Central; we'd barely kept enough for the task.

But then Lord Bentler said, "Whatever you have is enough. I'd like to buy it. And don't worry, I won't ask for it discounted like the Guild."

Presented with this offer, I had no choice but to consider it. I pretended to think it over a bit as the fourth head told me his thoughts on the matter.

"There's no use in arguing with him about it," the fourth head told me, having already accepted the lord's terms. "You can't even use Demonic Tools. There's no reason to be so fixated on having rarium."

He has a point, I thought.

I decided to take the lord's offer and told him I'd opted to sell. He told me one of his vassals would come around later to pick it up. Then, Lord Bentler handed me quite a lot of money. Like, *way too much* money.

"Umm...what's all this for?" I asked him, puzzled. "I get the feeling this amount doesn't match up with the cost of the rarium I have."

"Well, to be honest with you, I wasn't very happy with how the Guild handled your situation," Lord Bentler told me. He smiled at me broadly, but the look in his eyes was dead serious. "House Lobernia's policy is to gather adventurers and put them to work. Then, to treat them well enough that they stay for good. For that to be effective, good public order is required, among other things. And for that...the Guild's cooperation is essential."

"Ah, I get it," the sixth head said. "This is about that Santoire girl. If word of her attitude got out, there'd be rumors that Darion's a city that looks down on adventurers."

Lord Bentler took a quick sip of his tea, his voice as casual as if he was just

telling me a bit of gossip. “But my Guild seems to have made a grave mistake and pinned it all on you, my poor little Lyle. I can’t quite pretend I didn’t see anything, so I’ll be paying you for both the share of rarium that the Guild arbitrarily took from you, and the portion they got at a discount. *All* of it.”

My eyebrows raised. *That means we’re going to get back all that money we lost out on.*

“That’s very generous of you,” I told Lord Bentler with a smile.

Bentler chuckled. “Yes, it is, isn’t it? It just so happens that I’ve found myself in a very good mood. I’d prefer it if you keep it between us, but I’ve finally managed to set up a branch of the Darion Adventurers’ Guild in a place where territorial disputes made it very difficult for us to reach. It’s been causing me problems for a while now, so I’m feeling very swell now that the situation’s been resolved.”

Curious, I pressed him for more details. Apparently, the area he spoke of was within Darion’s territory, but far from any large settlements. It was a countryside area where development was running unfortunately far behind. The hope was this lack of development could be resolved by installing a branch office of the Darion Guild. This would also help take care of the area’s monster problem, which had been growing since it was difficult for Lord Bentler to send knights or soldiers there for political reasons.

“In that case, couldn’t you have just set it up as an entirely new Guild?” I asked. “Why did you make it a branch of Dario—?”

“Ha!” the fifth head snorted inside my head. “Come now, Lyle, don’t you think something about it being a Darion Adventurers’ Guild branch sounds pretty convenient? Like perhaps...the fact that it’s the perfect place to send someone as a demotion...?”

A name of a certain receptionist came rushing to the forefront of my mind, and everything clicked together in my head.

“You made that decision because of Miss Santoire?”

Lord Bentler nodded. “You’re quick on the uptake. But we won’t just be transferring the girl; we’ll be transferring her father too. It turns out the reason

she was able to just do what she pleased was because her father was a top executive. I thought I was quite clear with all of them about what my policies were, and I did my best to gather up newbie adventurers for them..." the lord sighed. "It's rather a pity all that went to waste, isn't it? But in the end, we've been left with the perfect candidates to transfer over to our new branch office. Truly, today is a joyous day."

"He's teaching the Guild a lesson," the third head said with glee. "He's showing them who's *really* on top. The Maillet family may be destined for an even worse fate than he's letting on."

So this isn't just a punishment for Santoire, I thought. He plans for this to serve as a punishment for the entire Guild.

With this knowledge gleaned, I climbed to my feet. "Since you've already given me my payment, I'll do my best to get you that remaining rarium as soon as I can."

Lord Bentler inclined his head. "Please do."

Soon after my meeting with Lord Bentler, my party and I found ourselves standing beside a public wagon train bound for Central, ready to board. Hawkins and Zelphy had come by to see us off, but the proprietress of the smithy and her husband had been too busy to come. They'd seemed absolutely mortified when I'd told them Novem was leaving Darion. Apart from them, I'd also gotten a goodbye from the owner of the inn I'd stayed at most of the time. He'd told me to "do your best out there."

Maybe it was a bit late for such a thing, but I was finally starting to feel the weight of all my encounters in Darion, from big to small.

As I sat there pondering, watching over our bags, Zelphy and Aria had sunk deep into conversation.

"Don't do anything too crazy, you hear me?" Zelphy demanded.

Aria just laughed. "You worry too much, Zelphy."

Novem and Sophia were standing nearby, talking to Hawkins. I couldn't hear

what they were saying, though, so I just relaxed and waited for our boarding time to arrive.

Or at least I *was* doing that, until the second head called out, “Looks like you have a guest, Lyle,” from within the Jewel.

I glanced up at the person approaching, and was surprised to see it was Rex of the SwordWings, as well as his party’s supporter. Their faces were both bruised—in fact, they looked worse off than when we’d saved them from the dungeon.

I wonder what this is about...

“Lyle...” Rex started, then paused.

“Err, yes. What is it?”

“I never thanked you for saving me, or apologized to you for what I did,” Rex finally said, taking me by surprise when he suddenly bowed his head. “I’m sorry for all the trouble we caused, and thank you for saving us.”

The supporter quickly chimed in and gave me his thanks as well.

Wait, that’s strange... I thought. Wasn’t there another one?

Rex must have noticed my wandering eyes, since he gave a bit of a sad smile. “He quit. Decided he’d settle down in Darion.”

So after everything that happened, he must have decided he was done with adventuring. I didn’t really know how to respond to that knowledge, so I didn’t reply.

Rex, for one, didn’t seem bothered by his old comrade’s decision. “It’s something we decided between us, so you don’t need to worry yourself over it. We all had a talk, and we accepted his choice to retire. But the two of us? We’re still adventurers. We’ll get back on our feet, just you watch.”

Huh, I thought, staring intently at Rex. He seems a lot more mellowed out than when we first met.

“Your goal is to go to Baym, right?” Rex asked. “Then that’ll be my goal too. I know we’re running a bit behind you guys, but we’ll catch up to you for sure. When that time comes, I hope you’ll let me thank you for real. We’re not really in a place where we can give you anything right now.”

Fair enough, I thought, smiling a little. The two of them do look pretty beaten up.

Still...I hadn't been expecting them to give me something in return for my actions. I wanted to tell them it wasn't necessary, but I got the feeling that wasn't the right thing to say. So instead, I told them: "I'll be waiting for you. Let's meet each other again in Baym."

Rex's wounded face broke into a smile. "Yeah, you bet! And the day we meet again, the drinks are on me."

Now I've made that promise with two different parties, I thought. Better make sure I measure up.

Once the wagon train departed from Darion, I settled in next to the window. As I idly stared at the scenery rolling by, I could hear Aria and Sophia chatting next to me.

Sophia sounded a bit nervous. "This will be my first time in Central..." she murmured.

"In my case, I just don't want anyone I know to see me," Aria admitted. She was from Central, and it seemed our imminent arrival had left her conflicted. "If I do, there's no telling what they'll say."

Novem leaned over to look at me, catching my attention. "Why don't we head straight to Aramthurst, milord?" she asked.

I thought the idea over a moment, but ultimately shook my head. "I'd like to have a look at the weapon selection in Central, and there's one other place that I'd like to pay a visit."

Novem's forehead wrinkled in confusion. "Was there some place that piqued your interest on our first visit there?"

"Not exactly," I told her. I didn't expect her to understand what I was getting at right away—we'd only briefly stopped by Central on our way to Darion, so I hadn't thought of going to this particular place at the time.

"Lyle, don't you go getting your hopes up," the seventh head said firmly,

having picked up on the idea right away. “We may have all been part of the same House Walt once upon a time, but they’re a different house now. They were good-for-nothings in my era.”

Well, I thought, he certainly doesn’t sound enthused.

The place I’d decided to stop by was where House Walt had originally begun—the estate of the House Walt that inhabited the imperial court.

“I, uh, wanted to stop by the estate of House Walt that’s located in Central,” I told Novem. “It’s still there, right?”

Novem’s expression clouded over. It was quite clear she didn’t want to get involved. “It is,” she said slowly, “but your portion of the house severed their connection with them a long, long time ago. Back in the time your grandfather, Lord Brod, ruled your house, the central branch were wandering around acting like beggars. I do not believe you should involve yourself in their affairs, milord.”

Acting like beggars? I thought, intrigued and confused.

“I was acting as an advisor to the royal family at that time,” the seventh head explained. “Those Central Walts got in touch with me, wanting to get their hands on a bit of my good fortune. They’re at the very bottom rung of the court, and don’t hold any government positions... Honestly the whole lot of them are nobles in name only. They don’t even do any work.”

“Still,” I said firmly, “I want to see them.”

My mind flickered back to the scenes I’d witnessed through the founder. *How much could the estate have changed over the years...?* I wondered. *All I want is a chance to walk through the same place I saw in the founder’s memory.*

I gave Novem a pleading look. “Is there some reason why I can’t?”

Novem looked a bit troubled, but in the end she reluctantly shook her head. “No, milord, there is not,” she said with a sigh. “If you wish to go, then that’s what we shall do.”

I felt a rush of relief, knowing I had her permission. If Novem had stood her ground and told me I absolutely shouldn’t go, I would have listened to her

advice. After all, the truth was I wasn't particularly interested in the Walts, or what had become of them. I just wanted to know for myself how much those streets had changed.

The day after we arrived at Central, I found myself standing in front of the detached residence I'd seen in the founder's memories. It was rundown, and that was putting it nicely. The untended yard was teeming with weeds, and there were cracks in the walls. If someone told me no one lived there at all, I'd believe it.

"This is even worse than I thought," I told Novem.

She gave me a tired look. She wasn't even trying to hide her distaste. "What did I tell you?" she demanded. Even her tone was a little harsher than usual. "This is a lowly, laughable place compared to the provincial house. These people don't have a shred of nobility—they have no position and no purpose. They just exist for the sake of existing."

I blinked at her in shock, taken aback to see her be so open in her disgust.

"It's rare to see Novem so emotional," the second head mulled. "Well, though I can't say I have any good memories of them either."

We couldn't just loiter in front of their door forever, so in the end we just walked off. At first, I'd thought, *Perhaps we'll be able to meet one of those Central Walts...* But apparently, that was not going to happen.

Chapter 43: A Day Off in Central

The shopkeeper placed another saber on the counter in front of me—it was practical and had hardly any ornamentation, like most of the other ones he’d shown me so far. Honestly, this shop had been a pleasant surprise. I’d been convinced that the weapon shops in Central would be loaded to the brim with decorative pieces.

“The design’s a bit rough,” I commented, then winced at my own bluntness. “To be clear, I don’t mean that as an insult. These sabers look like they could hold their own in real combat.”

“There are plenty of craftsmen who despise unnecessary decoration or are so picky they can only make weapons like that one,” the shopkeeper explained. “We don’t keep a high stock of sabers anyways, so it’s never really been an issue. But, if you want to keep up with the recent trends, I would recommend you take a look at the wall over there.”

The wall he gestured toward was hung with all sorts of sabers, each one inlaid with silver or gold.

One of those would do well enough in a fight, I suppose, but I know I’d always hesitate to use it for fear of damaging it in the heat of the moment.

To be honest, the blades didn’t really seem to be intended for use in battle, anyway—they seemed more like works of art.

I turned to the shopkeeper and shrugged. “It just kind of feels like...a waste, to swing a weapon like that around.”

The shopkeeper laughed. “Well, sabers are typically thought of as a noble’s weapon, and no true noble would get themselves caught up in a full-on fight around Central. The people who engage in combat for a living—knights, soldiers, mercenaries, and adventurers alike—tend to go for more sturdy, reliable types of weapons.”

Well, I thought, he’s not wrong. I’ve never met another adventurer who wields

a saber. In that case, maybe I should just go ahead and get one custom-made for me.

I reached out, picking up one of the sabers lying on the counter. “Any chance you could tell me how I could get in contact with the craftsman who made this, then?”

The shopkeeper shook his head. “It came from the north; I don’t know who made it, exactly. I *could* introduce you to a blacksmith in Central, though.”

I sighed. *Well, so much for that idea.*

If the shopkeeper didn’t know who the craftsman was, there wasn’t much I could do—I certainly wasn’t going to one of the shops in Central that produced artsy pieces like the ones hanging on the wall.

I turned back to the sabers on the counter, then snatched up the one that looked like it would hold up the best. It was a sturdy, practical weapon that looked decent enough that I wouldn’t have to replace it for a good while. I went ahead and purchased it, but in the back of my mind I knew I’d have to go commission one soon if I really wanted to keep using a saber down the road.

But, first things first, I’ve just got to find a blacksmith I can trust.

After that, I headed back to the inn we were staying at and dropped off my bags. I didn’t stay long—I just hooked my new saber into the belt around my hip and ducked right back out the door. Novem, Aria, and Sophia had all gone out shopping, so I found myself wandering the capital’s streets alone. There was just one problem.

“I’m bored,” I said.

“Sounds like it’s finally time for us to teach you how to have some fun, Lyle!” the sixth head cheered.

Feeling intrigued, I reached up and wrapped my fingers around the Jewel, clenching them slightly to indicate he should continue.

“I feel nothing but anxiety, hearing that from you,” the fifth head said, sounding thoroughly unenthusiastic.

“I agree,” the seventh head added, his voice sour. “I’m not sure Lyle should be learning what fun is from a guy who had *way* too much of it when he was alive.”

“*Ahem*,” coughed the sixth head purposefully. The other two fell silent. “Lyle needs a hobby or two. It’s important that he finds himself something to be interested in. And so...Lyle, go straight. Yes, perfect. Now turn right just over there.”

Following his directions ended up leading me down a rather suspicious-looking alley to a shop bursting with sound—cheers and groans alike. A fierce-looking man in a black suit was standing in front of the building’s door, his spine at rigid attention.

All right, in you go!” the sixth insisted, clearly having some sort of business in there.

The fourth head let out a long, revelatory sigh. “*Gambling* is your idea of fun? Come now; the whole activity is designed so the house always wins! It’s pointless to even try to achieve any other outcome.”

“Well...” the third head said slowly, “gambling dens *are* good places to test your luck. And he should be fine as long as he does it in moderation.”

That was enough for me—I stepped into the casino. Before long, I was walking over to a table that had a card game laid out, having decided that it would be the best choice for my first foray into gambling.

“Cards are a staple,” the sixth said from inside the Jewel. “You don’t want to miss out on them.”

I nodded, hunching over my cards to see what was in my hand. There were other players seated around the table too—apparently this game was one you played alongside other customers.

But while I was distracted by the other bodies around the table, my ancestors were plunging into a heated debate over the cards tucked between my fingers.

“I have a bad feeling,” the second head said ominously. “Lyle, you better fold!”

“But he’s got a half-decent hand,” the third said, sounding puzzled. “Why

don't we just have him trade in a few of his cards for new ones and see how things work out? Lyle, you should give the dealer three of the cards you've got in your hand."

"That's most of his hand!" the fourth head cried, mortified. "He should play it safe and—"

"Ugh, it doesn't matter what you do," the fifth head scoffed, yawning. "Just hurry it up."

"Don't mind them, Lyle," the sixth head boomed. "This is your moment! You just gotta go for it!"

The seventh head snorted in disgust. "Absolutely not!" he snapped. "Lyle should be focusing on building a reliable foundation for himself!"

I narrowed my eyes at the cards in my hand, then. *I'm not really sure what I should be doing with this, what with all of them disagreeing*, I thought wryly. *I guess I'll just trade in two cards.*

The cards I got in return allowed me to make two pairs, so I went ahead and played my hand. Unfortunately, it turned out one of the other customers had already been thoroughly prepared for my move, and they absolutely trounced me.

"What did I tell you?" the second head said triumphantly, huffing in exasperation.

This disdainful attitude only irritated the others, who urged me to play again.

Time passed by slowly, marked by a handful of wins and a number of losses. By the time I was done, I'd parted with several silver coins worth of chips, and found I only had a single one left to my name.

Which made me wonder: "Why are we playing with chips anyways? It'd be a lot easier to just use coins."

"Well, the world is a complicated place," the fourth head said, his voice taking on a philosophical tone. "Anyway, I guess we're done here."

"Not yet!" the sixth head cried. "There are loads of other games to play! Lyle, next...you should play that one!"

The game he indicated seemed to involve guessing where a small ball would land after it was tossed into a rotating platform. Honestly, I didn't find the game of much interest, but I didn't see any harm in giving it a try.

I sat down at the table and began to play. Within a few minutes, I'd gotten my ancestors worked up at my results.

"Lyle..." the second head murmured, "Aren't you a bit *too* good at this?"

I shrugged, not feeling particularly bothered by that assertion at the moment, while I was in the middle of a winning streak.

But the third head was as surprised as the second. "Way too good," he agreed. "Honestly, Lyle, you're kind of scaring me at this point. Not to mention the other guests—just look at their faces."

I glanced around me, taking in the surprised expressions of the employees and customers huddled around my table. Some of them were staring directly at my winnings, which had grown to be more than double what I'd been carrying when I entered the gambling hall. All told, my pile now probably totaled up to around a single gold coin.

"All right, Lyle," the sixth head said excitedly from within the Jewel, "How's it look—? Hey!"

The outrage was due to the fact I'd stood up, beginning to scrape up all my winnings in preparation to move to another table. *I'm already bored of this one*, I thought with a sigh.

But the sixth head *had not* been bored, and he raised his voice in a cacophony of bitter complaints. "Lyle, you can't be serious... Come on... Hey! You're really going to stop playing when you're up this much?!"

"I want to try another game," I muttered, scooping up the last of my chips.

After that, I made my way around the casino, trying a number of different things...and by the time I left, I was back down to having just one more silver coin than I'd had when I entered.

I'd won and lost, won and lost... I mean, I'd ended up on the plus side of things in the end, but it seemed like a bit of a waste of time when the only thing

I had to show for all that was a single silver coin.

What's the value in doing something like that? I wondered. *I guess I might have earned more during that time than I would have if I'd just worked a typical job, but still...I don't think it's for me.*

"Time to get out of here," I said with a sigh.

I only made a single silver coin, but maybe I can use it to treat everyone to dinner, I thought consideringly. But from now on, I think I'll pass on casinos in the future.

"Man, it's nice, all the stuff you can get in Central," Aria said with a happy sigh.

She'd gone out shopping with Sophia and Novem—mainly to buy clothing and other consumables—and had been quite pleased to find herself never wanting in terms of choice. As Banseim's capital and the city located directly in the middle of the nation, Central was unsurprisingly blessed with an incredibly wide and colorful selection of goods.

Now, with a bag in each hand and nearly every item crossed off her list, Aria was feeling quite cheerful.

"I was even able to replace my work tools!" she said with a grin. "They were getting pretty worn out, so I'd had my eye out for a while."

Sophia glanced down at her hands, which were similarly burdened with purchases. "I think I may have bought a few too many clothes, though..."

"They're necessary," Novem said, giggling as she looked at them both. "However...we might have to be a bit more sparing with money once we arrive in Aramthurst."

"Huh?!" Aria gasped, blanching. "Did we...spend too much, then?"

As far as she'd heard, the girls—or rather, the party—had plenty of money to spare. *But with an adventurer's lifestyle, that kind of money is probably pretty easy to run through, huh?* Aria thought, dismayed.

But to her relief, Novem shook her head. "No, this much is nothing," she

reassured Aria. “But our next destination *is* Aramthurst, after all. If you want to learn something, you’ll have to pay the price.”

“That’s right,” Sophia said, recalling what she knew of the city. “I’ve heard that in Aramthurst you can gain any type of knowledge or skill you so desire, as long as you have the funds to pay for it. Places of learning like the city’s famous Academy and smaller private schools aren’t free to use.”

Aria mulled over it a bit. “Putting that knowledge stuff aside, skills, huh...? Is it really that easy to pick up an important skill?”

“It depends on the skill,” Novem told her, her head lifting ever so slightly. “Some can take years to learn, while others can be learned in just a few weeks. There’s no need to push ourselves if there’s one we want that seems impossible, though. We can always recruit an adventurer who already has the necessary skills.”

A new comrade, huh? Aria mused. She wasn’t perturbed by the thought—Lyle’s party was a small one, as far as adventuring groups went. It gave them the ability to travel light, but it also meant each individual member had a larger burden placed on their shoulders in terms of what they were responsible for. It made sense to recruit new party members to lessen that burden. *After all, Aria thought with a little laugh, we’re not aiming to be a small group of select elites, and an adventurer’s supposed to search for comrades along the way. Normally. But...wait...*

Aria’s head jerked up. “Come to think of it, Novem, why did we never try recruiting Rondo’s party?” she asked. “I heard Lyle turned down their invitation, but they were good people, weren’t they? And didn’t Rachel try to recruit you?”

A conflicted look flickered over Novem’s face. “Yes, Rachel did make an offer once or twice, but it was clear our two parties wouldn’t be a good match for each other. We’re quite comfortable with Lord Lyle’s leadership, but Rachel and Ralph would have preferred to work under Rondo. This might not be the nicest way of putting it, but...we do not need two leaders. Rondo and Lyle would have had to come to a decision on which one of them held more power over the group.”

Ah, Aria realized, so when our parties merged, one of them would have ended

up usurping the final say. And regardless of who took over as leader, we probably would have had to make some pretty big changes to the party rules we've established so far.

Novem went on to explain that assimilating another party into yours just because you got along with them often turned out to be a gigantic mess. "And..." she admitted, "I honestly wanted milord's friends to remain just that, without the added stress of party dynamics on their relationships."

"I think I agree with Novem," Sophia conceded. "It's probably best we didn't merge, if we think all it might take to bring that friendship crashing down is one wrong step."

I don't really get what they're talking about, Aria admitted to herself, but if that's how they say stuff like this works, I guess I can go along with it. I still think we would have been able to pull off merging those three into our party, though...

"So..." Aria said thoughtfully, "how many more people are we planning to add to our party while we're in Aramthurst, then?"

Novem opened her mouth to answer, but was abruptly cut off.

"Hey, isn't that Lockwood?" came a snide female voice.

Aria glanced over, catching sight of two women standing nearby. They both wore cute, expensive-looking clothing and were looking at her with derision on their faces.

Oh, it's them, Aria thought with a scowl. She knew the two women quite well—they'd used to be her friends, years ago. But ever since House Lockwood had gone under, they'd grown quite distant from one another.

The two girls looked at each other and giggled. "What's with that look?" asked one of them. "Aren't you embarrassed, going around looking like a commoner?"

The other girl tilted her head sarcastically toward the first. "Oh, silly, didn't you know? She *is* a commoner. House Lockwood is no more. They were driven from Central and stripped of their place in the peerage..." She turned back to Aria and gave her a look of false pity. "So what brings you back here?"

Sophia drifted over to Aria's side. "Do you know these people?" she whispered in her ear.

Aria nodded. "They're nobles of the imperial court—well, daughters of them anyways. Regardless, I don't want to get involved. Let's just go."

Aria might have been friends with the girls once, but they'd only managed to get along due to the relationships between their houses. That was abundantly clear now, with House Lockwood's fortune in such decline. But, the truth was, Aria didn't mind that they were no longer her friends. She'd never really enjoyed hanging around girls of their sort anyway.

And that wasn't even accounting for the fact that they were from houses that had survived by sinking the Lockwoods. Not that House Lockwood was innocent by any means, but these girls' houses had committed similar crimes. They'd just managed to get away with shoving all the blame onto Aria's family so they could go about their lives as if nothing had happened.

Novem must have felt something in the air, because she started casually strolling away from the two girls. Judging by the two girls' faces, this was not the reaction they'd been hoping for—anger flickered over their faces.

"Hold on a second," snapped the first girl, stepping forward and grabbing Aria's shoulder. "Weren't you told to leave Central? I could report the fact that you're here."

Aria shot her a nasty glare, shaking her hand from her arm. "As long as I'm only here for a short-term stay, it won't bother anyone. And regardless, I'm not sure what my being here has to do with you."

The girls found that line quite funny—they started full-on laughing at her.

"You're not even a noble anymore," one of the girls said, rolling her eyes. "We could do all kinds of things to you, just on a whim. I can go ahead and call someone here right now if you'd like to be reminded."

Aria was about to speak up when Novem stepped forward.

"What's *your* problem?" one of the girls snapped.

"My apologies," Novem said in a bland tone. "But I, Novem Fuchs, am a

former noble myself, as well as Aria's friend. I cannot overlook this."

One of the girls kept glaring, unimpressed, but the other one went white the second she heard Novem's last name.

"She's one of the Fuchs?" she muttered. She grabbed her friend's arm. "Let's go."

"What?! Why do we have to run from them?!"

The first girl just ignored her friend, forcefully hauling her off down the road. Within moments, they were a good distance down the road.

Sophia stared after them, dumbfounded. "Is that normal in Central? I mean, wasn't that a bit much...?"

They were pretty arrogant, even for nobles, huh? Aria thought. She could see why Sophia would be so shocked by their behavior. Unfortunately, the Banseim Kingdom was a massive superpower, and there were many, many people among the upper crust who acted similar to those two girls. Honestly, their behavior had probably been on the more agreeable side of things...

In the end, Aria just gave Sophia a shrug. "Those two are harmless, relatively speaking. There are plenty of people far worse. On another note, Novem's last name is really effective. Maybe it's because she's a provincial noble...?"

"My house isn't that famous," Novem said, staring hard after the two girls as they made their way down the street. "But we are closely connected to House Walt. Perhaps that's why they acted as they did."

And with that, the three of them shrugged off the oddness of the encounter, and set course back to the inn to drop off the spoils of their shopping haul.

"Hmm..." I mumbled to myself. "Looks like I've still got some time left to kill."

I was still wandering around, waiting for Novem and the others to come back from their shopping trip. The casino hadn't been that interesting to me, and all the sixth head's proposals since then had been summarily rejected by the rest of my ancestors—they'd all involved alcohol and women to some extent.

The alcohol itself wasn't a problem, but it was too early in the day to drink.

And, as the fourth head put it, getting drunk before meeting up with the rest of my party just...isn't right.

Messing around with women had also been deemed a huge no. The fifth head was strongly against it, and so was the second.

The third head, however, had said, "You know, I think it would be good for Lyle to learn a bit more about women. I'm on board."

This alone was enough to put the wind back into the sixth head's sails. "Right?" he cheerfully replied to the third head. "Lyle, everything you do will be an *experience*. Seriously, you should play around a bit before you meet back up with your party."

The seventh head was completely silent. It actually made me quite curious about his thoughts on the matter.

But, alas... "You can say that all you want, sixth head, but I don't think this is really the time to do something like that."

A moody silence met my reply. I shrugged, walking farther down the path I was on until I picked up a foul odor floating on the wind. It was a rotten, tepid sort of smell. I scowled in disgust, but the people around me seemed entirely unaffected by it.

I continued onward, and eventually spotted a shop with all sorts of tools on display out front. By the look of things, it was a fishing store.

I stared at it for a moment, debating, and then the second head called out, "You want me to teach you how to fish?"

Something in my chest clenched a little. *The founder never got to teach me how to fish, since he left so soon. But at least I can learn from the second head.*

I gripped the Jewel tight in my hand, confirming our next set of plans, before entering the store and purchasing a whole set of gear.

"Oh, wow..." I said, staring out over the seething mass of trash that was Central's river. "It's absolutely filthy."

It turned out that the river had actually been the source of that horrid stench

I'd smelled earlier. There was a ton of trash, all of it drifting down the river as it rode the water's flow. Some of it would get caught up on the bank, lingering there alongside things best left unidentified.

Am I really going to make my fishing debut...here?

The second head seemed to agree with me to a degree. "This is *awful*," he said, sounding thoroughly flustered as we looked out over the churning water. "Are there even any fish in there?"

I looked up and down the riverbank, and surprisingly did spot the occasional fisherman here and there. *If they're here, there have to be some fish, right? And besides, it would be a waste not to make use of all the fishing gear I just bought.*

I went ahead and followed the second head's instructions, getting everything I needed prepared to begin. After that, I finally took hold of my fishing line and let it sink down beneath the water.

"Nothing's happening..." I muttered.

"Well, you're not going to just catch something right away," the third head said. There was surprise in his voice, like I'd shocked him with my ignorance.

Well, if I'm going to be waiting a while, I might as well find a place to sit, I thought.

I wandered around until I found a good spot, then got myself situated. After that, I just spent my time absentmindedly watching the river. *Now that I've got a good look at it, the water's the same color as the inside of a slime, I thought. It's that same murky pea green. It looks like it would be just as viscous too. Are the people who live in Central really fine with having their river look like this...?*

"Come to think of it," the fourth head reminisced, "I used to play in the river all the time. I wouldn't do that here, though—you'd catch yourself a disease in this one."

"Yeah, I remember that," the third head said in a warm voice. "You were always so happy when I took you out to play by the riverside. I was like that too when I was younger; my brother and I played there together all the time. But, uh...on a more pressing note...if you do somehow manage to catch a fish here, Lyle, will it even be edible?"

“We can’t possibly let Lyle eat anything that lives in this filth,” the seventh head said, horrified. “Lyle don’t you dare eat any fish that you catch here! No matter what!”

I couldn’t help but smirk a little. He was getting so worked up, but I didn’t really want to eat anything out of this river either. I just wanted to experience what fishing was like.

Silence reigned in my head for a short while after that, and then the second head started talking about his experiences fishing in the past. “Back when I was growing up on the Walt estate,” he said, “we were still out in the middle of nowhere. There was no pollution like this so far out, so the rivers were beautiful and full of fish. What we did with them mostly depended on the type we ended up catching—some we’d grill on the spot, and others we’d take home to clean up and cook. But, Lyle...even if you did your best to clean up whatever fish you catch from this river, I really don’t think you should eat them...”

“I played in the river we had on the estate, but I never fished,” the fifth head said enviously.

“Well, I got to fish when I left the house,” the sixth head said cheerfully. “I’d take all the fish I caught and bring them back for this girl I... No, never mind, it’s nothing.”

“Hey! Wait!” the seventh screamed. “*Girl?! I just heard the word ‘girl’!* Confess, you bastard! Don’t tell me you had a woman apart from my *mothers!* You’re not going to come out and say I have some more siblings, right—?!”

The sixth head fell ominously silent, and the Jewel grew very rowdy, very fast.

“Hey...” the second head said hesitantly, “that’s a bit—”

“I’m really not sure what to think about you surrounding yourself with women outside of the house,” the third head cut in. “From what I understand, didn’t you already have multiple wives back home?”

The fourth head had his head in his hands. “You’re the worst,” he moaned. “Even worse than Lyle.”

“You... What’s the *meaning* of this?!” the fifth head snarled, his bland expression shattered for once. “After all the trouble you cause me, you’re still

keeping secrets?!”

“Yeah!” the seventh head yelled. “Spit it out! This is your last chance!”

By the goddesses, I thought, could they be any louder?

I did find myself a bit intrigued, though, over how many glimpses I’d seen of the sixth head’s no-good side recently. I’d been taught that the sixth head of House Walt was a strong lord who’d not only managed to survive a harsh era, but *thrive* in it. He’d expanded our territory a great deal. *So why does he seem so hopeless...?*

“Hey, just shut up!” the sixth head wailed. “It was a clean breakup, and you do *not* have any *siblings*, okay? I’m telling the truth, I swear!”

This didn’t seem as if it was going to go over well, but before my other ancestors could chime back in, the sixth head yelled, “Oh, Lyle, look! Something’s tugging on your line!”

I rolled my eyes at his forceful changing of the subject, but let it go. *Even if I found out some harsh truths about him now, it’s not like I could do much about it*, I thought.

So instead, I focused back onto my fishing rod, which was indeed being pulled forward by something. I pulled it back toward me, and the rod curled in on itself at the pressure. Whatever was on the other end felt quite dense.

I leaned back, hauling hard on the line, and...the creature emerged from the river. It was very much *not* a fish.

I wrinkled my nose at the creature’s rather ominous odor, trying to figure out what exactly the thing was. It was so covered in mud that all I could really say was that it was, well...*something*.

I raised the fishing rod, staring at the creature as it dangled in front of me. “What is this thing? It’s got pincers.”

The second head chuckled. “Looks like it’s a crawfish. They’re not completely inedible, but you should release it just to be safe.”

Well, why not? I thought, reaching out to grab the creature.

“Wait!” the second head shouted. “You idio—!”

“Ow!”

I glared at the crawfish, which currently had my finger sandwiched between one of its pincers. With a jerk, I tugged it off the line, then hastily chucked it on the ground. The creature wasted no time in scuttling back into the river from whence it came.

I let out a long, drawn-out sigh. “Let’s just head back to the inn.”

It was about time for me to meet up with Novem and the others anyway, so I went ahead and started packing up my fishing gear.

“Hmm, so fishing’s no good too,” the third head said as I worked. He sounded disappointed. “What should we recommend next?”

I rolled the Jewel around with my fingertips, deep in thought. *I know this was a total failure, I thought, but honestly I didn’t hate it. Next time, though, I’d like to relax by a river that’s a bit cleaner than this one. Honestly, I might even end up enjoying it.*

In my head, fishing was less about catching fish and more about hanging around killing time while listening to my ancestors bickering with one another. And that? Well, it sounded like the perfect fit for me.

I finished gathering my things together, then scooped up my tackle box in my left hand and propped the fishing rod against my right shoulder. With my possessions positioned thus, I left the river and started making my way back into town.

Maybe I’ll invite Novem to come with me next time, I thought. But then my eyes narrowed—speaking of, I could see her and the rest of my party standing in a dark, deserted alley just a few yards away. They seemed to be in some sort of fight with a handful of people I didn’t know.

They’re against one girl and three men, it looks like, I thought, calculating the odds as I started to drift my way over. The mood looks ugly.

“You hate to see it,” the fourth head said, voice tinged in concern. “You should hurry up, Lyle.”

I didn’t need any more urging—I took off, rushing toward them. Along the

way, I could hear the unfamiliar girl screaming at my party.

“You may be connected to some provincial noble or something, but I won’t sully my honor by balking at a fight with someone so lowly they got driven from their own house!” she yelled.

By that point, I’d skidded to a stop just beside where Aria, Sophia, and Novem were standing. Aria and Sophia looked markedly relieved.

“Good timing, Lyle,” Aria said, smiling slightly at me.

Sophia gave me a serious nod. “I’m glad to see you.”

“Umm, did something happen?” I asked, trying to get a good handle on the situation. “What’s going on here?”

“She seems to be an old acquaintance of Aria’s,” Novem said, shaking her head. “But apparently she did not like the way I spoke to her earlier. She apparently decided to gather up these men to try and get back at us.”

I looked at the girl and the three men behind her. The men were all armed—and judging by the swords on their belts, they were almost definitely adventurers.

“They’re either at the very bottom of the imperial courts, or they’re second or third sons still living at home...” the sixth head scoffed. “She’s got some rather weak friends.”

“Well, it’s not like Lyle’s position is much better,” the seventh head calmly explained. “He’s a former noble, so he’s in a rather weak spot too. But seriously, these lowlifes are all she could find to gang up on our girls? You’d think she could find someone stronger...but alas, my apologies. I should’ve known better than to expect anything else from a court noble.”

My ancestors all burst into laughter at that, but the joke went right over my head. I didn’t have the time to ask either, so I just ignored them and stepped into the space between my party and the girl and her thugs.

“If my friends have done something rude, I’ll apologize,” I said calmly.

But it was not to be. The girl snorted, her eyes scanning me from top to bottom. “Oh, you’re just the perfect man to serve as a protector for such fallen

folk,” she drawled. “I mean, with those shabby clothes...you *must* be an adventurer. Makes sense—a derelict gentleman to serve a group of delinquents.”

I sighed. *She didn't even respond to what I said*, I thought, exasperated. *She's hopeless. Or, more honestly, she's so keen on fighting it wouldn't have changed anything no matter what I said.*

I eyed the men standing behind her. *Though if we're being accurate, she won't be the one fighting—they will. I better watch myself; it'll be trouble if I injure them too badly.*

From what I could tell at a glance, the men she'd carted with her wouldn't be much of a problem for me. Their movements were sluggish, and their weapons weren't properly maintained. But still...I'd prefer not to get into a fight with a noble if there was any other option to get out of it.

What to do... I thought idly, *what to...*

My fishing rod drifted into my line of sight, and my thoughts slid to an abrupt halt.

Aha.

Meanwhile, the noble girl was still prattling on. “Enough of this!” she snarled. “Punish them. When you go after the girls, aim for their faces. After that, you can do whatever you want with them. Oh, but don't kill them. It's more fun to let them live on in misery.”

That doesn't sound like a line any girl should be saying, I thought, feeling a tad disturbed.

But the men started drawing their weapons then, so I didn't have any time to do anything but hand my tackle box off to Novem.

She stared at the box in my hand, then back to me. “Um...milord?”

I brandished my fishing rod. “I think this'll do.”

The men took a look at the rod, then my serious face. Then they turned to each other, exchanged looks, and started to laugh.

“Hey, that kid's gonna fight us with a fishing rod,” one cackled.

The second one bent over at the waste, holding his stomach. “Is that weapon on his hip some kind of a decoration or something? Ah, whatever, we’ll just take it if he’s not gonna use it.”

The third man was looking at me with an ugly gleam in his eyes. “We’re going to shame you in front of your woman, boy.”

I raised my eyebrows at that. *You know, I think this is the first time I’ve ever been talked to like this. I mean, sure, adventurers can be crude, but I don’t recall any of them being this bad.* Actually, now that I thought about it, they kind of reminded me of that time I’d fought off those bandits that had kidnapped Aria. *Wow, are these guys really giving off the same air as bandits? Hey, Banseim court nobles, are you really okay with your sons being such thugs...?*

Regardless, it was time for me to make my move. I swung my rod forward like a whip, aiming for the first man’s hands. I whacked the back of his hand so hard it swelled up an ugly red right away—his fingers loosened, and his sword plopped right to the ground.

“Y-You bastard!”

I rushed in, sending a kick right into the man’s chest and making him stumble backward. Then I kicked his weapon away, making sure it was out of range of the fight.

I went after the second guy next, making quick work of him and his weapon as well.

“How stupid are these guys?!” the third head demanded. He was stunned—but by the idiots I was fighting, not me. “There’s three of them, and they’re not even trying to surround you! I mean, *come on*, have these guys even been in a real fight before?”

The first man—who I’d kicked—was still laying on the ground where he’d fallen after I kicked him, writhing in pain. I’d singled him out since he looked like their leader, and judging from the lackluster fighting responses from the other two, I’d been right.

With the first and second man disarmed and out of the fight, there was only one left to take care of. I swung my focus to the third man, who dropped into a

sloppy stance when he faced me. His whole body was shaking, and his blue hair had fallen over his similarly blue eyes. Now that I had a better chance to look at him, he seemed pretty young—almost around the same age I was.

I swung my fishing rod forward, pointing it at him, and he flailed around frantically with his sword, looking absolutely terrified.

“Take this!” I yelled, diving at him. “And this!”

On my second cry, I knocked the weapon out of his hands, and without further ado, he turned around and fled.

Aria stepped forward then, a crease on her brow. “Wait,” she said, “that kid’s —”

“What are you doing over there?!”

We all froze, turning toward the booming voice. A tall man with silver hair was striding toward us, the grace and smoothness of his movements clear even under his long cloak. *Must be well-trained*, I thought, taking in the way the man’s tan skin laid over his serious-looking face, and the longsword that dangled threateningly from his belt.

The remaining two men took off at the sight of him. “H-Hey!” the girl screamed. “Don’t you dare run! If you run, you’re really gonna get it!”

She seemed to be a pretty strong-willed girl, but now she was frozen in fear as the intimidating figure of the silver-haired man drew close to us. Once he was close enough to get a good look at what was happening, he took a long look at Novem, Aria, Sophia, and I, then over his shoulder to where the men were currently vanishing down the street.

“It seems like I’d better hear your side of the story first,” he said to me with a sigh.

I leaned the fishing rod against my shoulder, casual as could be, and started answering all his questions. Meanwhile, Aria and Sophia circled around the girl to make sure she didn’t run away.

“I see,” the silver-haired man said, running an exasperated hand through his

hair. “If that’s really what happened, it makes sense that you’d want to throw hands. And for those three men to lose just to a fishing rod... I heard the quality of nobles around here was low, but this is worse than I thought.”

The girl gritted her teeth, glaring at us, but the silver-haired man seemed completely unmoved.

The man’s name was Hawlite Grantz, and he was a provincial noble. He was in Central at the moment because he was serving as a security detail for his benefactor. To be clear, that meant he had quite a bit of skill under his belt.

“You may not want to hear this right now,” he said sternly to the girl who’d set up the attack, “but you’ll ruin your reputation if it gets out that you attacked someone based on your own false allegation. Not to mention the fact that they totally turned the tables on you. How about you just decide to bury the hatchet and act like nothing happened?”

This seemed to finally release the girl from her frozen state. “You’re just some lord from the sticks,” she screamed. “Your house isn’t even independent—you’ve got to suck up to some other lord to support you! And you think you can go against *me*?!”

“All righty then,” Hawlite said slowly, scratching at his long silver hair. “Sounds like you don’t intend to stand down, hmm? Now that’ll be some trouble. Now that you’ve gone so far as to mock me and try to pick fight with me, I’ll have to report this whole thing to my benefactor. He’ll need to know that I’ve earned myself the resentment of a court noble, and that he might be attacked because of it.”

The girl’s mouth opened and closed in a flustered rush, her eyes wandering between Hawlite and the rest of my silent party.

“What am I missing here?” Aria asked Sophia.

“Well, in order to have his own dependents, a lord has to have risen to at least the rank of baron, if not higher,” Sophia explained. “Even a court noble would hesitate to pick a fight with someone who has that high of a rank. After all, court nobles don’t have many personal soldiers.”

Central was under the protection of the king, and the nation was managed by

the court nobles who lived among his court. But since the court nobles were required to live in the capital, this meant they held no land of their own, and lived off the annual stipend given to them by the crown. This meant that they didn't have to bother with all the complications of managing a territory, but it also meant their earnings were far less than your typical provincial noble.

"Come on," Hawlite pleaded. "How about you stand down, for both our sakes?" When he was met only with silence, he turned to me. "Lyle, wasn't it? You'd be fine with that, right?"

I nodded. It wasn't like I wanted revenge against her or anything. In fact, I had absolutely no desire to get involved in this kind of mess whatsoever.

I'll be happy just to not see the girl ever again.

"V-Very well, if you *insist*," the girl stammered. "I guess I can turn a blind eye to the ignorance of some *country bumpkins*. Now, get out of my way!"

The girl shoved Aria and Sophia to the side, then strutted out of the alley with rage exuding from every dramatic step.

"Best be careful around people like her," Hawlite said with a bitter smile. "But, wait, did you seriously defeat three men with just a fishing pole?"

Seems like he's far more interested in that than her, I thought with a smile.

I gave the rod a test swing. "Yes," I told him with a grin. "It's so bendy I thought it would probably hurt a lot if I smacked someone with it."

I gave the rod another swing, enjoying the swooshing sound it made when it cut through the air. But then...I felt a strong tug.

Where is that...?

"Hey!" screeched a voice in the distance. "What're you—? *Aaah!!!*"

My brow furrowed, I turned toward the scream, only to see the same girl who had harassed us before. The back of her skirt was hovering in midair—on closer inspection, the hook at the end of my fishing line had caught in its fabric. And of course, with the skirt tugged up like that, all its...contents...were on display.

"Lyle, you really need to remember to remove the hook when you're done fishing," the second head informed me.

The girl was flailing around, panicking. I looked blankly between the four sets of eyes glaring at me, surrounded by the very displeased faces of Hawlite and my three female party members.

Hawlite leaned in close to me. "For starters, how about you go ahead and release her, hmm?"

"*Lyle*," Aria snapped. "We need to talk."

Sophia glared at me too, a disappointed look on her face. "I didn't think you'd do something so shameful."

"Y-You guys have it all wrong!" I protested. "This is pure coincidence!"

The third head burst out laughing. "Aha ha ha, you're amazing, Lyle! You managed to hook a girl!"

"That's quite a catch!" the sixth head burst out. "A whopper, right there!"

This is nothing to laugh about! I screamed internally.

I turned to Novem, hoping desperately she would at least believe me. She was looking at me with an incredibly serious look on her face.

"Milord, I do think this is most likely a misunderstanding...but just in case, I feel I must tell you that she would *not* work out. That girl does not fulfill House Walt's precepts."

My mouth dropped open. *Novem...what sort of man do you think I am, exactly?!*

I turned away from her and cut the fishing line, face red. *I'm gonna have to have a serious talk with her about all this.*

The girl turned back one more time, her eyes flooded with angry, embarrassed tears, before she ran off.

"I'm sorry!" I shouted at her back. "I promise it wasn't on purpose!"

Once she was gone, I turned back to the others. "Do you...think she heard me?"

"It's still no good even if it's on accident!" the fourth head roared into my ear.

“You go apologize to her this instant!”

Left with no other choice, I went tearing off down the street after her.

“The...two Great Knights of Banseim?” I parroted, staring at Novem.

Night had fallen by this point, and we were situated in the inn’s dining hall as Novem told us about Hawlite.

Sophia looked at me, her brows raised in shock at the fact that I’d never heard of them. She hadn’t known how famous Hawlite was either, though, so I didn’t know why she was making such a fuss.

“They’re two great warriors who have distinguished themselves in battle on the border around Auran,” Sophia explained. “The first is known as the Black Knight, and the second is known as the Sand Giant. I didn’t know Sir Hawlite was the true name of the Black Knight, though.”

Auran is the name of the town that Rondo was headed to, I remembered. From what he’d told me of the place, it was a gathering point for mercenaries and adventurers, since the knights of the area were busy dealing with the tempestuous border.

“Some say he’s only managed to make such a name for himself because the border provides so many opportunities to show off,” Novem went on. “Pretty much all the skirmishes have been on the northern front and around Auran ever since Fonbeau’s princess got engaged to our crown prince and that border calmed down.”

Well... I thought, no matter how strong a knight is, they wouldn’t be able to become famous if there wasn’t a stage to exhibit their skill.

“The more exaggerated your moniker is, the more viciously you get targeted on the battlefield,” the fifth head explained. “If you can fight and manage to survive with a moniker like that, you’re the real deal. As you are now, Lyle, you wouldn’t stand a chance against that guy.”

He did have a real presence to him, I mused. *I could feel how strong he was, just by standing next to him.*

“The world is vast,” I said thoughtfully.

“Wait, that’s right!” Aria cried out. She gripped the table with the force of her recollection. “You guys remember those three men that attacked us? Didn’t one of them look like Lyle?”

“He did *not*,” Novem immediately refuted. “He just had the same hair and eye color.”

“O-Oh...” Aria stammered. “Are y-you sure? I really thought he looked quite similar.”

The sixth head hummed in thought from inside the Jewel. “Well, the hair and eyes were pretty similar, and that pathetic aura was kinda close too... But that’s nothing to worry about! Anyways, today was pretty fun, wasn’t it, Lyle?!”

I nodded. I’d gotten a really good chance to enjoy myself. I was exhausted after all the stuff that had happened, but it had undoubtedly been a fun break.

But, I swore, that skirt stuff was not by design. I want to emphasize that point.

Epilogue

Night had fallen, and it was now prime business hours for a relatively pricey bar in Central. One of this bar's visitors just so happened to be a man named Hawlite. He strode casually through the front door and chatted up the host, then was led to a private room not long after.

The person he was looking for was already drinking without him.

"Long time no see, Maksim," the silver-haired knight said, smiling slightly.

Maksim, the large man at the table, lifted a hand. "Yeah, I haven't seen you since that last time you called for reinforcements. You're not looking too shabby."

"And you, Sir Sand Giant, are looking the same as ever," Hawlite drawled back, dropping into a chair.

He'd met Maksim on the frontlines what seemed like ages ago, when he'd had to call for reinforcements during one of the endless number of skirmishes that popped up around the border. The battles were varied, with some being big and some small, but the fight had gotten serious enough that day that Hawlite had found he'd needed some additional help. The two knights had gotten to know each other pretty well that day, and had been friendly ever since.

As Hawlite relaxed into his seat, the host slid the door shut behind him, leaving them alone in the room. The Black Knight's eyes went sharp and he leaned forward across the table, whispering, "So, did you hear?"

"I'd like to believe it's a lie," Maksim whispered back. "If he's actually broken his engagement off like that, he's lost his mind. Especially with how the relationship is between our two countries."

Hawlite shared this opinion wholeheartedly. He leaned even closer to Maksim, keeping his voice hushed just in case someone was trying to overhear. Maybe he was being too cautious, but he felt it was too dangerous a topic to do

otherwise. “The rumor hasn’t spread yet,” he murmured, “but apparently it’s true. My benefactor confirmed it.”

“You know...for a joke, this isn’t very funny,” Maksim curtly replied.

Hawlite gave him a wry look of agreement. “Central’s been acting strange for a while now. I’m guessing that’s why my benefactor and your master decided to drop by.”

“It’s not just the nobles here either,” Maksim murmured, taking a sip of his ale. “The residents are acting strange too. Did you hear? A while back, it was like a national holiday when House Walt came to visit. I know they’re a popular house, but it was strange.”

The mention of House Walt brought a bitter look to Hawlite’s face. “Well, those Walts are the reason the crown prince broke off his engagement,” he said, rubbing a hand across his face. “Or their daughter is, to be more precise.”

“Their daughter...?” Maksim asked, brow creasing. “Oh, right, the eldest son was disinherited. What insane stuff did he have to do to have them...? Wait, you’re *serious*?”

Hawlite nodded. “I actually met the disinherited son today. He’s a bit dubious, but not bad enough to be kicked out. I’d even say he’s promising. If either one of us fought him, we’d win, but not without injury.”

Hearing this, Maksim laughed. “Nice. I welcome strong guys. As allies, better yet. So, what’s dubious about him?”

Hawlite paused for a moment, mulling over whether to tell the story or not. But ultimately he gave in and told a tale of three men, a fishing pole, and a skirt. Maksim listened, mouth agape, and burst out laughing at the end.

“Oh, he’s a riot!”

Hawlite was laughing a bit himself. “He certainly is. Well, that’s not the sort of thing you should be doing to a lady, but he did ultimately apologize, so I don’t think he’s a bad person. But...” Hawlite’s expression went serious, making Maksim abruptly correct his posture. “We should get back to the main topic. If this engagement fiasco goes through, Banseim’s going to see some rough times. And it might not even just be Banseim caught up in this mess—it could cause

sparks to go up all over the continent. Things are taking a bad turn. You look out for yourself, Maksim.”

Maksim nodded, and the tension slowly dissolved. The two knights seemed to decide wordlessly to cast off their worries for the rest of the night, and spent the rest of their time at the bar laughing and drinking like the old friends they were.

It was widely known in Aramthurst that the majority of the students attending its Academy were children of the nobility. Most of these students rented themselves apartments from amongst the lodgings available in the peculiar metropolis, some more extravagant than others, but it also wasn't rare for the children of nobles with stature to rent out entire mansions.

It was in one of these mansions—a manor estate rented by Viscount Circry—that two sisters lived.

The elder sister was named Miranda Circry. She sat upon her younger sister Shannon's bed, her head cradled in her expressionless little sister's lap.

“Oh, sis,” Shannon murmured softly, stroking Miranda's shoulder-length, verdant green hair. “You're so headstrong. If only you'd do as you were told.”

Miranda's green eyes—which normally glistened with life—were squeezed tightly shut. At times, she would slowly open and close them again, but they were faded, devoid of light. Her face, which was usually graced with a sly mischievous smile, was dreadfully vacant.

“Ungh...” Miranda moaned, and Shannon hushed her softly, the younger girl's long hair slipping forward over her shoulder in a stretch of pale purple waves. Shannon's skin was a bleached, bone white, the color particularly pronounced due to her refusal to go outside. But her skin wasn't the thing about her that caught the most attention—that was her eyes, which were typically a liquid amber, but now glowed gold.

Even the girls' figures were quite different—Shannon had a slender, elegant form, whereas her elder sister had a physique that showed the first budding signs of womanly development.

“Urgh...” Miranda moaned again. Left unable to emit any discernible words, she was free for her sister to command.

It was a peculiar, unnerving sight.

Shannon looked at the ceiling with unseeing eyes, the corners of her lips rising into a smile. “Soon. *So soon*. The house that threw me away, the woman who wouldn’t recognize me. Soon, they’ll have no other choice,” Shannon said, clenching her right hand.

Her eyes might not have been able to see through conventional means, but they could perceive the flow of mana just fine. It comforted her, to know that despite the fact that she was blind to how others saw the world, she could see what they could not.

This was the power a weak girl abandoned by her own house had managed to obtain. And now, she was attempting an even further evolution, with her elder sister as her test subject. Why settle with just reading mana’s flow? Who was to say she could not bend it to her will as well? And so, Shannon had used her hard-won abilities to seize onto her sister’s mana, and was now trying her best to manipulate the workings of her heart.

“Sis, you’re going to be my adorable doll, okay? So do your best, for my sake.”

But Miranda’s vacant face, pressed down into Shannon’s lap so the younger girl couldn’t see it, was no longer as blank as it had before appeared. A wide smile stretched across the green-haired girl’s lips, as if her own dark intentions exceeded even those of Shannon’s herself.

Early the next morning, Miranda stood in the kitchen, preparing breakfast. It was a rather odd thing, to see a daughter of a noble up so early, cooking for her younger sister and tending to her every need. Considering her status as the daughter of a viscount of the court, it was odder still.

Miranda let out a long sigh, muttering to herself, “Why do the helpers never stick around? The pay shouldn’t be a problem, and the work conditions are better than most other places...”

Creeeak, came the sound of a door opening.

“Oh, are you awake, Shannon?” Miranda called out.

“Yes, sis...” murmured a feeble voice. The younger girl rolled into the dining room on a wheelchair, her hand on the wall to guide her.

Miranda received her with a smile. “Give me a minute; breakfast will be done soon. I’ll leave you some lunch too; make sure to eat it! Oh, and don’t answer the door while I’m at school, no matter who it is.”

“I know, sis,” Shannon replied. “Hey, do you think that the Academy is a tough place?”

Placing a hand to her hip, Miranda said, “It’s decently tough. There are some interesting classes, but... Oh, I have to hurry! Let’s wash your face before breakfast, okay?”

“Okay,” Shannon agreed.

Miranda—who was her blind younger sister’s caretaker—really was the best sibling one could wish for. She was such a kind soul that accompanied Shannon when she was sent to Aramthurst; after all, Miranda wouldn’t have been able to live with herself if she’d left Shannon alone...

Miranda carefully wheeled Shannon into the washroom, asking her what she wanted to eat for dinner as she cleaned her up for the day. Truly, it seemed like nothing more than the simple morning routine of two very, very close sisters...



Finally, I could see the Academic City from my wagon train window. The long journey had been interesting in its own way, but I had started to get sick of traveling, and it had dragged on just a bit too long. As such, the sight of our destination put me greatly at ease.

“Aramthurst at last,” I mumbled under my breath.

The Academic City was located to the south of Central, in a safe region that allowed the existence of a wagon train that ran directly between the two cities. Though this made for convenient transport, there was still a fair bit of distance to cover.

“My body’s stiff after all this sitting,” Aria said, rolling her shoulders. “Oh, and that’s strange; there are a lot of buildings taller than the outer walls.”

I nodded—she was right. The buildings were so tall that you could make them out from afar, along with many other structures sticking up over the city’s walls.

“Aramthurst is quite a large city, isn’t it?” Sophia asked, vibrating with excitement. “I’m a bit surprised it was able to develop this much without a lord.”

“It’s a special place,” Novem explained. “Thanks to the dungeon, the city has plenty of resources. Although admittedly, it’s quite different from most other cities. I should also mention that I’ve heard they aren’t so kind to adventurers there.”

“Huh?” I said, straightening a little in surprise. “Will we be all right, then?”

“Oh, they’re not treated *that* terribly,” Novem said, hurrying to correct herself. “The way things get prioritized there is just a bit special. In Darion, the lord rules over both the land as well as the Guild, but in Aramthurst, the city is ruled by the Academy.”

An academy can rule a city? I thought, feeling a bit skeptical. *I don’t really get it.*

“So that’s the Academic City, huh?” the second head said excitedly. “I wonder what sort of place it is.”

“Well, we’ll know once we get there,” said the third head. “I’m more curious about the city’s libraries than anything else.”

“I’m just hoping that Lyle can pick up a few necessary skills there,” the fourth head admitted.

The fifth head hummed in thought. “So a school runs the whole city?” he mused. “I’m intrigued, but I won’t be able to say much until I see it in practice.”

The sixth head let out a long-suffering sigh. “Sounds like a real stiff place.”

“However...” the seventh head said, “the fact that they’re maintaining a dungeon within the city means that there will be abundant Demonic Stones and resources up for grabs. Apart from that, I’d assume it’s the sort of place you’d send noble children.” He snorted. “Seeing as there’ll be plenty of court nobles in there, let’s just hope we don’t get caught up in any petty quarrels.”

I winced at that. We’d “quarreled” a bit in Central, with that girl and her trio of thugs. I definitely didn’t want something like that to happen again, and I especially didn’t want to get caught up in some unnecessary drama.

Honestly, I just hope I can do some studying... I thought.

When I looked up, I found Novem staring at my face, smiling.

“Wh-What is it?” I stammered.

“You’ve started to look more dependable, milord.”

“I... *Really?* I hope that’s true,” I answered.

“She’s right,” Aria agreed. “Or at least, you look more reliable than before. Ever since that dungeon, it’s like you’ve cast off a bit of your hesitation.”

Sophia seemed to think so too. “Indeed,” she cut in. “I guess it goes to show that the experience wasn’t for nothing.”

“It’s, uh, because of the promises I made to Rondo and Rex,” I said, awkwardly scratching my cheek. “I have to do my best, so we can share a laugh together in Baym.”

That’s right, I reminded myself. I made a promise to them to meet up again in Baym. I’ve got to set my sights on that city and not look away. I may still not be

able to picture myself as a first-rate adventurer...but I can see myself standing shoulder to shoulder with my friends.

“Well, that goal should be fine for now,” the second head said warmly.

“Right,” the third head agreed. “You can make a decision after you’ve done some more learning.”

“You know,” the fourth head added, “I’m a bit curious to see what Lyle’s outlook on the future ends up being.”

“Well,” the fifth head said, “regardless of what you want to do, you’ll need money and power to get there. And for that, I recommend polishing your skills.”

“*But!*” the sixth head added. “He’s also gotta learn to have a bit of fun in life.”

The seventh head could only sigh. “Should I just be happy that my grandson is growing, or should I be lamenting his insistence on sticking to an adventurer’s path...?”

Moments later, the wagon train began to slow to a stop as it approached Aramthurst’s gate.

“Let’s start preparing to disembark,” I said, turning to Novem, Aria, and Sophia.

As we gathered our things, a nervous, hopeful energy filled my body. *Just what sort of place is Aramthurst?* I wondered.

It seemed I was about to find out.



“My name’s
Eva. It’s a
pleasure to
meet you.”

3

Author
Yomu Mishima
Illustrator
Tomozo

SEVENTH



Novem, Aria,
and Sophia
met back up
at a café with
a calming
ambiance.

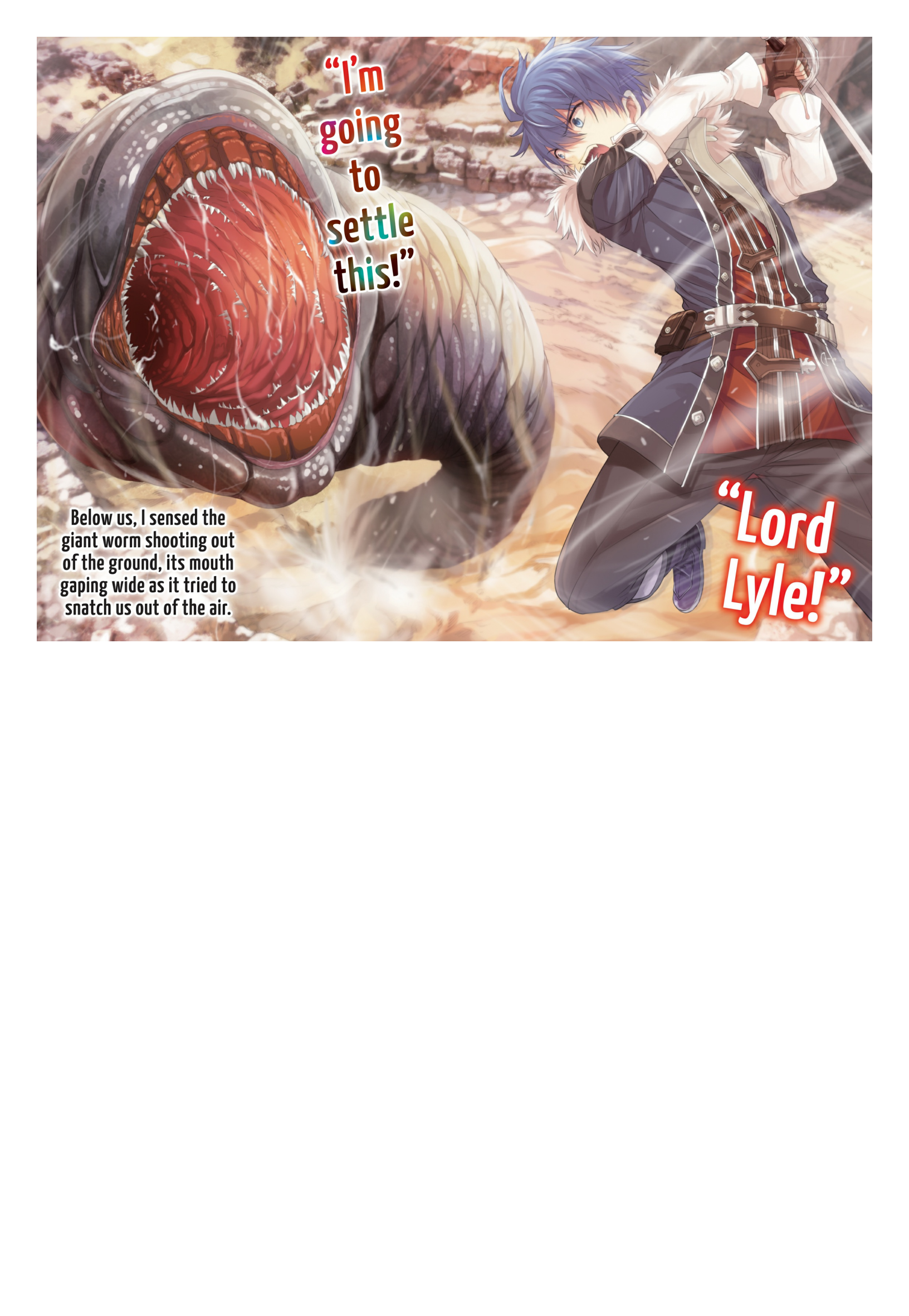
“Is Lyle...up to
another one of
his schemes?”



Ceres stood
over **Rondo**,
a rapier in her
right hand
and his stolen
dagger in
her left.

Miranda laid on her
expressionless
little sister's bed,
her head resting
on **Shannon's** lap.





**“I’m
going
to
settle
this!”**

Below us, I sensed the giant worm shooting out of the ground, its mouth gaping wide as it tried to snatch us out of the air.

**“Lord
Lyle!”**













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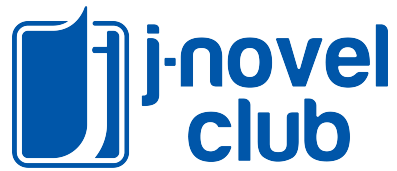
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Seventh: Volume 3

by Yomu Mishima

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